

ALFRED CORTOT:
HIS INTERPRETIVE ART AND TEACHINGS

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In memory of
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Preface

An individual of manifold talents and all-embracing culture, Alfred Cortot (1877-1962) held a position of prominence in the musical life of Europe for well over half a century. What set Cortot above so many of his contemporaries was his rare universality of mind, which sought to encompass an ever-vaster sphere of musical knowledge and professional activity. Cortot was a world-renowned interpreter whose Chopin and Schumann performances in particular were immensely poetic and original, and whose recorded legacy documents the grand romantic style at its most inspired; he was a superb chamber musician and accompanist, and a founding member of the most celebrated trio of the early twentieth century. He was a conductor who established many symphonic and choral ensembles, and who gave the French premières of works of Wagner, Beethoven, Liszt and a long roster of his own contemporaries, both French and foreign; a brilliant organizer, he founded a host of professional societies and social service agencies, some of which are still active in France. He was a distinguished, much sought-after artist teacher, a co-founder and for many years the director of the Ecole Normale de Musique

(Paris), a prolific music writer, lecturer and editor, a devotee of scholarly pursuits and a music collector who amassed one of the finest private libraries of manuscripts and early printed books assembled in modern times--Cortot exemplified the ideal of a versatile and comprehensive musicianship and artistic culture.

Cortot was an extremely complicated and fascinating personality. The interpreter was a past master at evoking all the rapturous, passionate, tender and intimate aspects of Romantic music. The man was aloof and self-possessed, concealing a secretive nature behind a public persona that wielded every charm and social grace with virtuosic refinement. The musical thinker was an incorrigible idealist, a visionary of soaring imagination and penetrating insights. The man of action was an ambitious, tough-minded pragmatist, as adept at the business and politics of music as he was at the art of music-making. The semblance of fervent, spontaneous outpouring projected in Cortot's playing was a consciously cultivated element of an interpretive conception that was rigorously thought out, controlled, measured. This innovator who discovered unknown potentialities in the piano's tonal resources did not really want to play the piano, but rather to transform the instrument into a singer, an orator, an orchestra. He had sublime interpretive ideas and unreliable fingers. He wrote an exhaustive and still valuable compendium of technical exercises, and then made it almost a point of

honor not to discuss technique in his master classes. His interpretation courses and recordings brought him a host of distinguished disciples, yet he accepted no regular students during the prime decades of his career. Self-sufficient but never self-satisfied, solitary and almost monomaniacally absorbed in his own work, he attracted countless talented and dedicated individuals into his projects--collaborators, sponsors, assistants and devoted admirers who were eager to help him further his ends. There was something so exceptional in the artistry and the personage of Cortot that they willingly overlooked his temperamental and domineering character, his technical imperfections, his habit of couching his artistic opinions in categorical dicta which he himself did not always follow in actual practice. That "something" deserves our close attention.

The desire to do justice to the complexities of Cortot's nature and art has prompted the somewhat unusual organization of this study. It was originally envisioned as a straightforward examination of Cortot's teaching and pedagogical legacy. During research in France, however, a wealth of documentation came to light which led me to see his accomplishments in a broader and no doubt more accurate perspective. In the course of piecing all the evidence together, it became clear that a narrow approach to the subject was inappropriate: Cortot was not a pedagogue in the modern sense of the word, and any attempt to codify his teachings into

fixed rules or to extrapolate a "system" from them would entail supplementing and ordering the evidence in an arbitrary manner that could only falsify the picture.

A compartmentalizing approach is not only methodologically inadvisable in Cortot's case, it would also be contrary to the very spirit of his art. Cortot's artistry was all of a piece: the master teacher was inseparable from the interpreter, the musical thinker and formulator of "poetic" explications, the erudite humanist and the highly charismatic personality. However many contradictory and sometimes controversial aspects there were to Cortot's character, in the artistic domain his work displays a remarkable unity of spirit and purpose. In order to fully appreciate the significance and originality of Cortot's achievements in performance and teaching, moreover, it is necessary to situate him in his historical context. Certain features of his art that may perplex or annoy a present-day musician--characteristic value priorities, exaggerations and limitations, odd inconsistencies and dichotomies of thought, for instance--only begin to make sense when one knows the French musical and pianistic tradition from which Cortot emerged and against which he often rebelled.

These considerations dictated a more extensive and integrative treatment of Cortot's work. The present study retains a primary concern with Cortot's "teachings," in the broadest sense of that term, but it incorporates aspects of an intellectual biography and a critical style analysis. This

rather singular approach enabled me to give full weight to both the historical setting and the authoritative sources, i.e., Cortot's writings and recorded performances and the testimonies of students and contemporaries. I have included numerous excerpts from these primary sources in the study on the grounds that presentation should precede interpretation.

Some of Cortot's more important articles and commentaries, originally published in periodicals that are not readily accessible today, have never been reprinted or translated into English. Other material now in print would benefit from a re-presentation. A prime example of this last is the series of highly informative interviews with Cortot that Bernard Gavoty conducted for Radio Suisse-Romande (Lausanne) in the nineteen-fifties. Gavoty drew on these texts liberally in his biography of the pianist, Alfred Cortot (Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 1977), but his habit of freely paraphrasing Cortot's statements in order to "modernize" and simplify Cortot's style rendered the material presented of dubious value for scholarly purposes. Still another set of documents, including Cortot's personal teaching diary and official progress reports on his Conservatoire pupils as well as interviews with students conducted expressly for this study, has never been published. In view of the inaccessibility of much of the documentation and its potential usefulness to later writers, I deemed it better to err on the side of over-quoting,

allowing the sources to speak for themselves and adding explanatory remarks and analyses where appropriate.

For greater continuity and ease of reference, all quotations from the French are given in English translation. All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own. It is with much reluctance that I abide by the custom, now standard in works of this sort, of quoting the sources only in translation. French is very unlike English in the movement of its thought. As Steven Lukes notes in his introduction to Emile Durkheim (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 3, "[s]ometimes what is perfectly intelligible in French cannot be directly translated into seemingly equivalent English words. The French words... make different discriminations and carry different presuppositions and connotations." Beyond this general challenge, Cortot's florid and sometimes convoluted style poses special problems and seems to resist all attempts to render it into a reasonably faithful and readable English prose, as anyone who has consulted the successive English translations of his study editions can verify. I have endeavored to stay close to the tone and style of the original texts, while avoiding a literalist rendering. Where the exact French term is significant or no close English equivalent to the original wording exists, the French is given in parentheses in the text. Single words and short expressions are underlined; longer phrases or sentences are not, for the simple reason that they

would clutter the page and unduly distract the eye if so treated. Where the content or manner of expression of a longer text is particularly interesting, the original is given in footnote. In the case of significant unpublished documents such as letters, the original appears in full in Appendix I or II.

Cortot's rich, complex sentences and his rather precious turns of phrase pose difficulties for the reader no less than for the translator. His manner of expression was a personal embellishment on a period style that was already considered passé in his own day. It is easy to become caught up--whether through amusement or annoyance--in the words, and lose sight of the thought and meaning conveyed by them. Thus, when Cortot speaks of music as "bearing a message of the ineffable which comes down to us from time immemorial," of music being "both a compensation and a consolation in life, deserving that one live for it as much as by it" ("Le Professorat," radio interview with Gavoty), we tend to smile today at this luxuriant eloquence. We must be wary, however, lest we look only as far as the rhetorical flourishes, rather than grasping the intent of Cortot's discourse, which was to affirm several basic tenets of the romantic artist's credo, namely, the transcendental powers of music and its exalted place in the order of things.

I recall a conversation with Bernard Gavoty in 1978, during which he defended his decision to "cut out about every second adjective" from Cortot's texts as the only way to keep Cortot from appearing "ridiculous" in modern eyes. My own view

of the question of style is very different. The trace of artifice in Cortot's manner of expression is a trait of personality, as much a part of his individuality as his unique piano sonority or his pronounced esprit de contradiction. It marks him, as surely as Ravel's exoticisms and touch of preciousity marked him, as a product of the fin de siècle, with its impulse towards dandyism and studied elegance. To omit the tone of affectation because it no longer appeals to contemporary tastes would be to depict Cortot in a false light. Similarly, I have not tried to conceal the occasional self-contradictions, misconceptions or gaps between intention and practice that surface in Cortot's work. Cortot's strengths are such that he may be allowed his flaws, artistic and human. It is my conviction that he is best served by a treatment that is closer to critical sympathy than to unconditional adulation.

The decision to view Cortot from a historical perspective has led me to refer in passing to a great many individuals and aspects of French musical and cultural life with which the reader may be relatively unfamiliar and which, consequently, need identification or explanation. For ease of reading, footnotes are grouped at the back of each chapter. Their number and location dictated the adoption of a fuller reference form for repeated citings of the same text than is customarily used.

A few works which are scarcely mentioned in the study were helpful in shaping my thinking on, or treatment of the

historical and sociological aspects of my subject. In Paris, fellow researcher George Humphreys introduced me to the works of Thomas Kuhn and Michel Foucault, which set me to reflecting on ways of relating Cortot's artistry to the major aesthetic currents and playing styles of his time. Closer to my own field of inquiry, Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger's Chopin, vu par ses élèves, 2nd ed. (Neuchâtel: Ed. de la Baconnière, 1979), Kenneth Drake's The Sonatas of Beethoven as He Played and Taught Them (1972; reprint ed. Bloomington: Indiana U. Press, 1981) and the French edition of Heinrich Neuhaus' book on piano playing, L'art du piano, tr. Olga Pavlov and Paul Kalinine (Tours: Ed. Van de Velde, 1971) each provided valuable ideas on treatment and ordering of materials.

Although only the final two chapters contain extensive quotes from interviews, the contribution of living informants to this work was an inestimable one. Through the kindness of Cortot's son, Jean Cortot, and others, I was able to make contact with a number of Cortot's students and close associates, nearly all of whom agreed to interviews. Mmes. Cécile de Brunhoff, Charlotte Causeret, Jeanne Leleu and Marthe Morhange-Motchane, and Mm. Jules Gentil, Louis Goupy, Jean-Pierre Marty, Pierre Petit and Jean de Saint-Arroman graciously shared with me their recollections of Cortot's playing and teaching. Some of those interviewed during the early phase of research--Yvonne Lefébure, with whom I studied, Bernard Gavoty, and three who contributed generously to this work,

Magda Tagliaferro, Blanche Bascourret de Guéraldi and the very warm and perceptive Reine Gianoli--are no longer here to see it completed. To all who related to me their impressions of Cortot, I owe a debt of gratitude. With an intensity and immediacy that the written word cannot attain, they managed to bring Cortot alive and convey something of the spirit in which he approached music. They gave this inquiry a human dimension it would otherwise have lacked.

Nothing I can say in the remaining acknowledgments will more than hint at the extent of my obligation to the many persons and institutions who assisted me in carrying out this project. I am particularly indebted to Walter Robert, who as my teacher has contributed immeasurably to my musical development, and as my advisor and friend has long been a creative sounding board and source of constructive criticisms, and above all, encouragement; to Jean Cortot, who, with Pierre Petit and Rémy Boissonas of the Ecole Normale de Musique, provided advice, documents and material support which enabled me to research in far greater depth than otherwise would have been possible; and to Marilyn Glezen-Kirtland, who at the very outset of this project gave the crucial aid and encouragement that set it in motion.

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My final, but in truth my foremost acknowledgments go to my family; equally to Susanne Schwibs, who has given moral and tangible support in countless ways through the long writing of this work; and to my friends, colleagues and students (they will, I hope, forgive me if I do not mention them individually) who have shown faith in my ability to pursue to completion when I myself had doubts.

Introduction

As far as the last century, and the romantic piano in particular are concerned, we are only now realizing that they pose problems for the interpreter that are analagous to those faced in music of more distant ages. This new category of concerns arises to the extent that our epoch becomes aware of itself as no longer constituting an extension of the last century, but rather as representing a break with it. The period between the two wars, the last bastion of post-romanticism, rediscovered the Baroque era; a similar impulse now makes us feel the need to re-establish our relationship with the nineteenth century on different terms. As soon as a period becomes past history, there is a resurgence of interest in its celebrated works and artists....

- Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger¹

The responsibility to come to grips with the interpretive issues raised by nineteenth and early twentieth century literature falls on pianists with particular urgency. Like it or not, romantic music still constitutes the backbone of our repertoire. Glancing at the programs of Cortot's 1924 recitals at the Ecole Normale (Chapter VI) or at the list of compositions he had his Conservatoire students play in their examinations between 1907-17 (Chapter VII), one is struck by how little things have changed in sixty years. Barely a handful of those pieces have disappeared from the standard repertoire. The rest can be heard every day in music school juries and recital stages around the world. It is high time we take a fresh look at the past century's legacy and cultivate a closer understanding of the spirit expressed in its music.

Obviously, the music itself holds the most important keys to its interpretation. The score need not, and often should not, be the performer's sole referent and source of insights, however. Historical and stylistic information, familiarity with a composer's total output and with the characteristics of period instruments, knowledge of the ideological and social forces, the ideas and artistic aims which together mark an era and its aesthetics--all can bring one closer to a composer's thought processes and spiritual world. So, too, can studying the thought and artistry of the great performer-teachers of the past. But much depends on forging better communications between those who practice and teach the pianistic art, and those who write about it.

If inquiry into the work of a performer-teacher is to be of real value to present-day musicians, it must get beyond the anecdotal and furnish knowledge that is of practical utility and relevance to us in our artistic development and professional activities. Knowledge, that is, which facilitates access to the music, and understanding of the meaning it had for its contemporaries and their aesthetic heirs; knowledge which sensitizes us to elements in the music that earlier generations deemed significant but that our own may have come to take for granted or have lost touch with entirely. Research into past technical practices, such as is documented in Reginald Gerig's Famous Pianists and their Technique,² has proved its usefulness in the codification and dissemination of solutions to the technical problems confronting all who study

and teach the literature. If the artist-teachers of yesteryear can help us cope with the physical dimension of our art, can they do likewise in the spiritual, in the interpretive? The answer would seem to be yes--on certain conditions.

The first stumbling block is the scarcity of primary sources. Many of the finest master teachers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did not leave detailed accounts of their interpretive views. Those who did give specific performance indications for the literature were often writing not on their own authority but as depositaries of a particular performance tradition, e.g., as disciples of a major composer.³ Not that performers and teachers were reluctant to write about music--on the contrary, they devised reams of "methods" and exercise books, extravagant literary programs and poetic ruminations that were to serve students as "emotional props."⁴ A few even tried to formulate general stylistic and pianistic precepts.⁵ But verbalizing in detail their understanding of the music's demands and offering precise interpretive guidelines called for a particular critical and speculative bent of mind which few seemed to possess. Then, too, the essence of their understanding and their teaching was non-verbal, embodied in a certain praxis, and transmitted primarily by demonstration. Certain well-known "professors" offered their students neither specific suggestions nor illustrations at the keyboard, but merely prestige, the presence of a powerful role model with whom youngsters could identify.⁶

The second problem in reclaiming the legacy of an artist-teacher involves the difficulties of retrieval. Important fragments of a body of work often survive in a hodge-podge of dispersed sources. The task of locating, weighing, cross-validating and synthesizing from them an accurate picture of the artist's thinking is a formidable one, discouraging to all but the most stubborn and perseverant researcher.

Eigeldinger's Chopin vu par ses élèves is an excellent example of detective work and source collating that yields information of real practical value to performers and teachers, though he leaves the reader very much to his/her own devices in the relative valuation of the sources (anthological) that he cites.

With artists closer to our own day we have the very significant advantage of recordings, which often tell much that the performer-teacher could not or did not verbalize. The recording also allows for cross-validation, to some extent. One can compare an artist's explications to students (or readers) of what is required in interpreting a work, with what he/she actually does in performance. It may be true, as Kenneth Drake suggests, that "as the person plays, or would like to play, so he also teaches."⁷ It is also certain, however, that few if any artists teach all that they do in performance (i.e., all that can be learned from their playing). A great artist-teacher like Liszt is reported to have played with an utterly innovative technique, while continuing to teach a traditional approach to developing technique.

A final condition for recuperating insights from the views of earlier masters is a willingness to abandon a Darwinistic outlook on interpretive style and thought, which considers earlier performance practice as a series of stylistic phases advancing towards the present--more "perfect," it is often assumed--state of the art. The aim of this work on Cortot is not primarily to judge, and certainly not to judge from the present vantage point and stylistic taste. Rather, it is first of all to understand, which entails studying his art and views from the perspective--quite different from ours--that reflects the objectives and standards of his day. It entails determining what influences shaped his thought, what the relationship is between his views and those of his predecessors and contemporaries, and what ideas or practices he reacted against. Only thus can one appreciate the integrity of his views in his own time and present them with maximum clarity and force. Secondly, it aims to assess, which here means not to deliver a definitive judgment of Cortot's art, but rather to investigate the value and effectiveness of particular practices, to ascertain what elements in his art and teaching have validity, efficacy or explanatory power for present-day practitioners and which, if any, of his ideas are being perpetuated by disciples or emulators.

Fortunately for this researcher, Cortot left an extensive record of both his interpretive thought and his pianistic art. As a result of his literary efforts and those of close associates, Cortot's is one of the fullest expositions of an

empirical teaching on written record, comparable in scope and interest to those of Heinrich Neuhaus and Artur Schnabel.⁸ Unlike Schnabel's, it is also a rich repository of insights into the performance attitudes and aesthetic values of romantic pianism. On this historical basis alone it would deserve close study. Its greatest merit, however, is its wealth of ideas about musical works, its presentation of interpretive and teaching ideals, and the many solutions it proposes to problems of ongoing concern to the field.

The main sources of information concerning Cortot's views and performance art are these:

- his "study editions" (Editions de travail) of the Romantic piano literature, of which there are seventy-six volumes in all; these are copiously annotated with remarks on the work's historical background, aesthetic commentary (discussions of poetic "content," character and intent, interpretive suggestions based on structural, stylistic and expressive considerations) and technical advice, including exercises constructed on difficult passages.
- his recorded comments to students who performed in various of his master classes (cours d'interprétation); these were transcribed, edited and published in a series of "reports" that appeared annually in a well-known music journal, the Monde Musical, during the late 1920s and early '30s. A number of these accounts were later collated and published in an anthology of Cortot's interpretive teachings on musical works in conventional forms (oeuvres de forme fixe).⁹
- numerous short writings, among which: a booklet for aspiring teachers, outlining the basic principles of piano pedagogy;¹⁰ the edited transcript of a seminar on piano pedagogy, offered by Cortot in 1931 to teachers and students at the Ecole Normale de Musique;¹¹ articles for Paris music periodicals on diverse aspects of the art (the role of the interpreter,¹² the demands of a virtuoso career, piano teaching at the Conservatoire National de Musique [1920], the contribution of French pianist Edouard Risler, musical America in 1919, and other topics); transcripts or summaries of addresses to student

of Cortot's teaching (length and frequency of lessons, repertoire, etc.), but seldom recalled Cortot's advice on specific pieces--not surprisingly, in view of the time elapsed.

It may be useful at this time to draw attention to several distinctive features of Cortot's manner of thought and expression. He was without a doubt one of the most articulate and highly cultivated artists of his generation. Ruth Fermoy spoke for many of his students in describing him as an artist "who opens up wide horizons for [his pupils] in every field,... a man who asks for the 'why' of things, in music as well as in life in general, with that need of clarity and understanding and that dislike of muddled thinking which are so typically French."¹⁸ Like other nineteenth-century artists (Chopin, for one) who made the cantabile style the foundation of their playing, he saw music as a language whose communicative ends, syntax and inflections were akin to those of poetry or prose. He displayed for the language of sounds and that of words an equal passion.¹⁹

A combative thinker, Cortot states his ideas at times in a figurative or categorical manner that leaves them open to misinterpretation. His vision is sharp and his thinking lucid, but his love of words and desire to over-nuance his impressions sometimes produces complicated, rambling sentences. He occasionally succumbs to the temptation of trying to create a literary equivalent to the music, thereby unwittingly undermining his objective--which is to direct the performer's attention to the musical substance, not the words. Many other

times, though, his incandescent poetic imagery sparks the imagination and sets the performer to reflecting far more deeply than he/she otherwise would have on the meaning of the music.

recordings. The essentials of his pedagogy are elaborated by Konrad Wolff in The Teaching of Artur Schnabel (London: Faber and Faber, 1972).

⁹Jeanne Thieffry, ed., Alfred Cortot: Cours d'interprétation, Vol. I (Paris: Librairie musicale R. Legouix, 1934). Cortot's commentaries, culled mainly from stenographic transcripts of master classes, are grouped according to the form of the works discussed, with chapters on prelude and fugue, suite, sonata, concerto and variation. A projected second volume devoted to pieces of "free form" (ballade, impromptu, nocturne, etc.) and to music with popular or dance elements was never published.

¹⁰According to Thieffry a first version of the text appears in the Monde Musical, 39, No. 5 (May 31, 1928), pp. 171-72; A revised and expanded draft, printed in vol. 42, No. 7 (July 31, 1931), pp. 235-40 of the same journal was also issued as a pamphlet intended for use in the pedagogy courses of the Ecole Normale de Musique. Much later the text was published with Italian, English and German translations as I principi essenziali della lezione pianistica (Milan: Curci, 1960).

¹¹Thieffry, ed., "Les Cours de pédagogie pianistique d'Alfred Cortot," Le Monde Musical, July 31, 1931, pp. 235-40.

¹²Cortot, "Attitude de l'interprète," Revue internationale de musique, No. 5-6 (numéro spécial consacré au piano), (April 1939), pp. 885-88.

¹³Unpublished document from the archives of the Ecole Normale de Musique, made available to me by Pierre Petit.

¹⁴Pre-recorded in Lausanne (Switz.) during October 1953 (according to documents in the archives of the radio station; Gavoty [A. C., p. 24] gives the date as "the summer of 1955"), these conversations were broadcast over Radio Suisse-Romande in Nov. 1953 as a ten-part series entitled Entretiens avec Alfred Cortot. Bernard Gavoty kindly allowed me to photocopy his typescript of the interviews.

¹⁵Also formerly in the Risler collection, now at the B.N. (Dép. Mus.): the private diary of Mimi Girette Risler (wife of Edouard Risler), who coached with Cortot and Fauré.

¹⁶Alfred Cortot, dir. Edmond Lévy, ORTF Antenne 2, 1977. This television special honoring the centenary of Cortot's birth was organized as a panel discussion. It was of particular interest since participants included Bernard Gavoty, Yvonne Lefébure, Reine Gianoli, Jacques Fevrier, Jean-Pierre Marty and Eric Heidsieck. Edmond Lévy graciously provided a typed transcript of the sound portion of the original footage, which was twice as long as the final edited broadcast.

¹⁷Gavoty attributed Cortot's last-minute refusal to approve publication of the biography to Cortot's aversion to seeing the events of the World War II years as well as certain opinions of individuals he had expressed in the immediate post-war period, recorded in hard print. According to Gavoty (p. 12), "[Cortot], no longer weighed down with the worries that had obsessed him to the point of making him judge unfairly, saw things now in a completely different light and had, unknowingly, reconstructed one phase of his life with imaginary materials. He had, literally, become another man, and no longer recognized himself in the mirror I held out to him."

The whole issue of Cortot's political sympathies and actions during the war years, which led to his subsequent discreditation in the eyes of some, has become incredibly muddled. Fact, insinuation and outright fabrication mingle inextricably. What is needed is not more conjecture based on contradictory "reliable" sources but verifiable information and documents--if such can still be assembled after all these years--from which one can piece together an impartial account of what took place. Unearthing all the evidence needed to "set the record straight," however, would be a research project of major proportions in its own right, and one with little relevance to the aims of the present study. Therefore, only the briefest account of events is offered herein (see Chapter VIII, pp. 524-26 and 554-56).

¹⁸Ruth Fermoy, "Cortot," Recorded Sound, No. 16 (October 1964), p. 267.

¹⁹In light of the fact that Cortot was Swiss by birth, of humble origins (his father was a manual laborer) and had no formal education apart from his music studies, the following passage from Theodore Zeldin's Histoire des passions françaises 1848-1945: Orqueil et intelligence, tr. Catherine Ehrel and Odile de Lalène (1977; Paris: Ed. Recherches, 1978), pp. 25-26, is thought-provoking: "To those who had mastered the French language solely by their own efforts,... it represented much more than a simple means of expression. Jean-Paul Sartre tells how his grandfather..., an Alsatian, was at seventy still dazzled by the French language 'because he had learned it with difficulty and it wasn't completely his: he played with it, enjoyed words, liked to pronounce them and his merciless diction did not spare a single syllable.' Grandfather and grandson corresponded in verse: 'united by a new bond, they spoke to each other... in a [secret] tongue....' Sartre described the effects of this special rapport with words on his outlook: having discovered the world through language, 'I long mistook language for the world. To exist, was to possess an appellation contrôlée somewhere in the myriad tables of conjugations.' To explore the world did not mean to plunge into it, but 'to capture things, alive, in the trap of phrases,' give them a name, and above all, take pleasure in words."

Chapter I

Childhood and Background (1877-1887)

Alfred Denis Cortot was born on 26 September, 1877 in the town of Nyon, Switzerland, which lies on the shore of Lac Lemman (Lake Geneva) between Lausanne and Geneva.¹ His father, Denis Cortot, was a native of Villars, a small village near Tournus in the Maconnais (Burgundy)² region of France. At the time of Cortot's birth, Denis Cortot worked for the Compagnie Jura-Simplon as foreman of a railway maintenance crew. Cortot's mother, Marie-Anne Faustine née Baillif (or Baïf), was a Swiss national of humble origins, the daughter of farm workers who came from the Ajoie (Jura mountains) district of French-speaking Switzerland.

Alfred was the youngest of seven children, three of whom died before 1877.³ He grew up surrounded by serious adults and near-adult siblings. The Cortots were earnest, upright people whose means were as modest as their social standing. Austerity was a way of life with them; moreover, the struggle to meet basic needs left little time for leisurely pursuits. Theirs was a closely knit family, and Cortot remembered the home environment as warm and supportive. Mme. Cortot took pains to instill in her children a sense of personal dignity⁴ and

self-sacrifice for the good of the family and taught them to think independently and to respect intellectual endeavours.

This sober but very stable environment marked Cortot with several indelible traits: a deep faith in the work ethic,⁵ scorn for idle pleasures as for easy success, an exceptional resourcefulness and self-possession, resiliency, and a driving ambition to better himself and his station. "Blessed with a prodigious energy [and]... an extraordinary power of concentration,"⁶ Cortot was iron-willed and highly intelligent. He tended to be unrelenting in the pursuit of the objectives he set for himself. "Authority, respect [and] perseverance were the three watchwords of his parents," asserted Gavoty. "Having commenced a project, he saw it through to the end. In this sense there was something of the 'laboreur' in Cortot: once he began to plow a furrow, there was never any question of his breaking off short of completion."⁷

Capable of considerable tolerance toward others' (especially students') shortcomings, Cortot displayed "an almost puritanical sternness toward himself..., an extreme severity that dictated his every word and gesture, [and] likewise... conditioned the response of everyone who spoke to him,"⁸ according to Henri-Louis de la Grange.

On stage or in the teaching studio, Cortot was a formidable presence, with an intensity and a quality of power about him that commanded deference.⁹ John Philips, an American who studied at the Ecole Normale in the 'fifties, wrote that

"he projected an awesome and indefinable aura."¹⁰ Many who met him were impressed by his striking appearance,¹¹ his aristocratic demeanor and tastes, and his disarming personal charm. Those who knew him more than casually marvelled rather at his unflagging love and enthusiasm for music, his intellectual vitality and his thirst for knowledge. To critic Roger Boss, Cortot was "immensely full of life. His conversation was wonderful. He always tried to get to the heart of problems, to understand, to draw a lesson from persons and things."¹²

For all his charisma and elaborate courtoisie, Cortot maintained an imposing emotional reserve in his dealings with people, seldom inviting familiarity and leaving even long-time acquaintances mystified as to his real feelings and motives. In the final analysis he was a very private man who seemed to find strength and refuge in solitary activity. Gavoty implies that he rejected close friendship.¹³ It is perhaps more accurate to say that Cortot's whole life was given over to his work in music: he had little time for anything or anyone that did not further his "mission."¹⁴ From childhood on he retained a compelling sense of purpose and duty¹⁵ and an almost ascetic view of life.

Musical Debuts

Unlike most famous concert pianists, Cortot had not been a child prodigy. In fact, in later life he enjoyed playing up his inauspicious beginnings, asserting that

... contrary to the tradition which says that a child destined for music will show exceptional gifts from the outset, I came to music neither by preference nor by aptitude. My vocation was decided for me by my parents, who in spite of their modest social rank had an innate respect for every lofty manifestation of the spirit. As they saw it, all one needed in order to take up a particular career was a show of willingness, an appetite for work, and patience--traits that ran in each of their... families.

[I took up the piano]... when I was about five, I would imagine, but I didn't give the slightest indication of having the talents one associates with "child prodigies."¹⁶

.....
When I was very small I was intrigued by sounds, and I dreamed of becoming a doctor. Neither inclination worked against the other. It may even be that my penchant for inquiring deeply into music derives from that early interest in auscultating [human] bodies.¹⁷

.....
[As a child] I was enthusiastic, naturally studious and quite eager to submit to the gentle but serious family disciplines which presumed to make me a "willing recruit"... to a calling decided by a purely hypothetical conviction.... [I had] no particular musical or physical gifts. Only the docile, compliant nature I just referred to.¹⁸

While one should not take too literally Cortot's contention that he had no musical aptitude,¹⁹ the evidence does suggest that his was hardly a precocious talent. Moreover, his suspicion that his parents' ambition to make a pianist out of him was sparked by non-musical considerations,²⁰ in particular the desire for upward social mobility, may well have been correct. Such an attitude was not uncommon in the social milieu from which he sprang, especially among those unacquainted with the artistic world.

Geneva

Having decided that their youngest son would be a concert pianist and composer, Cortot's parents spared no effort to further his chances of success. In 1882 the family moved from Nyon to Geneva, a city reputed to have a fair number of cultural resources. Alfred's sisters, who in addition to their studies at the College de Nyon were taking classes at the Geneva Conservatoire,²¹ tutored their brother in the basics of music. It was decided that Léa, the eldest, should supervise his piano studies. Annette would teach him solfège and harmony. At the time, Cortot recalled,

... my parents had no piano in their humble residence, but the same bold enterprise that prompted them to try to make a musician out of me... led them to decide to purchase a used instrument. And truly, [that piano] is the * image from those times long past which stands out most vividly in my memory.

I need only close my eyes to see again its yellowed keyboard, some of the ivories marked with depressions hollowed out by obstinate [finger]-prints, which should have sufficed to forewarn me... of the ominous rigor of a study capable of inflicting such impressive stigmata.

I can picture as well its strange exterior, adorned with curious so-called "decorative" latticework, through the slits in which unevenly discolored folds of purple silk showed. And above all, I can still hear its sour, rather sickly tones, which to all evidence attested to a good half-century of uninterrupted use. This instrument of dubious origin bore the label "Piano Bucher."⁺ I didn't know it yet, but this name [Bucher], taken as the infinitive of a transitive verb if there ever was one, indicated rather well the demanding sort of work I was about to embark upon.²²

⁺ 'bucher': colloquial French for "to slog away at" (a task), "to cram" (as for an examination)

Cortot always spoke admiringly of the early musical training he received from his sisters, with its stress on "tenderness and imagination":

Incomparable, unforgettable guides, they always gave an associative and imagery-filled meaning to note learning, to basic principles of piano playing, to the expressive qualities inherent in even the simplest melodies as well as the dynamic character of the underlying rhythms. This enabled me to forget the ruthlessly abstract side of rudimentary music learning, and to place music on the fringe of reality, in just the sort of unsuspected magical world that could enchant a less than ideal childhood (or so I was later told), one bereft of all kinds of play....

My whole career and the course of my later study were surely influenced by that first encounter with the secret meaning of sounds. No doubt my predilection for what has sometimes not too charitably been termed * [my] 'expressionisme',⁺ which I've tried to make the lynchpin of my interpretations, stems from there.²³

⁺'expressionisme': it is not clear whether Cortot is alluding to critics who found his style hyper-expressive by French standards, or to persons who took exception to his "symbolist" leanings (i.e., his tendency to find a specific poetic or imagistic meaning in music).

Only a few years after the move to Geneva, it became evident that Alfred would soon reach the limits of his sisters' competence. If he was to continue to progress musically and pianistically, he would have to have first-rate professional guidance. This was apparently not to be found in Geneva.²⁴ In 1886 the whole family moved to Paris "at the risk of finding only the most precarious means of earning a living"²⁵ so that he might attend the venerable Conservatoire National.

An Unremarkable Entry

The Paris Conservatoire National de Musique et de Déclamation,²⁶ then approaching its centenary, ranked among the foremost music schools in the world. The Cortots must have known that it would be no easy thing to get Alfred admitted, but it is doubtful that they had any clear notion of what that institution expected of its prospective students. Ten-year old Alfred, in the words of Boss, "was still a long way from Chopin, Schumann, Beethoven and César Franck. His repertoire consisted mainly of transcriptions of popular tunes, fantasies and diverse paraphrases."²⁷ Casting about for a way to bring Alfred to the examiners' attention, the parents hit upon the idea of having him audition with Streabbog's Fantaisie brillante sur des motifs des 'Noces de Jeannette.' It was known that Victor Massé, the composer of the comic opera that inspired this bit of salon fluff, usually sat on the admissions juries. At least he would be predisposed in their son's favor.

There was only one flaw in this clever scheme: Massé had been dead for two years. Scarcely had young Cortot begun to play the momentous audition when he was interrupted by an outburst of sniggering from the jury, followed by the jingling of the chairman's bell calling the assembly to order. Mystified as to the reason for the clamor but certain of its meaning, Cortot beat a hasty retreat from the stage. He gave this account of what followed:

Profoundly disconcerted by this unfortunate gaffe,... my sister and I had no choice but to make our way home, bearing the sad news of what we took to be an irreparable failure.

But as we crossed the courtyard of the old building on the Faubourg Poissonnière, we were approached by a kindly looking character who at this moment of utter confusion gave the impression of offering divine solace, as much by his compassionate words as by his curious appearance, which reminded one of the Heavenly Father as he is depicted in first communion portraits.

It was Emile Decombes, professor of one of the two preparatory level piano classes [for boys], or "classes de clavier" as they were called back then. He assured my poor mentor [Léa], who was no less distraught than I, that he believed he had discerned in my brief performance, lamentably cut short by the jury's laughter, qualities which led him to suppose that after spending a year in his class as an "élève libre" (that is, as an auditor),... I would be ready to present myself with some chance of success at the next year's entrance examination--provided, of course, that I chose another repertoire.

To a child who has just lost his footing and tumbled into the bottomless depths, it was like being thrown a miraculous lifeline.²⁸

Decombes (1829-1912)²⁹ was a shrewd judge of talent in the rough, as well as an excellent motivator. In this instance his prediction was right on the mark. After sitting in on the classes for a year, Cortot reauditioned the following fall, this time performing a "Concerto by Dussek."³⁰ On November 7, 1887 he was formally accepted into the preparatory division of the Conservatoire.

Chapter I: Notes

¹The facts of Cortot's family background are drawn from Bernard Gavoty's biography, Alfred Cortot, henceforth abbreviated as A.C.

²According to Gavoty (ibid., p. 22), "Cortot's Burgundian origins on his father's side are indisputable, despite the spelling 'Corto' on old parish registers, [which] suggests a Catalan origin." Curiously, this family, which boasted no noted musicians among its forebears, suddenly produced two in the late 19th century. One of Denis Cortot's brothers was the grandfather of Edgar Varèse (1885-1965), and Varèse spent a good part of his youth in Villars par Tournus.

³The surviving siblings, Oscar-Jean, Léa-Céline and Annette were, respectively, twenty, fourteen and twelve years old at Alfred's birth.

⁴"If you cannot rise, at least fall no lower," was her oft-repeated advice, reports Gavoty (A.C., p. 23).

⁵Cf. A.C., pp. 211-212: "What [Cortot] admires in others is what he cultivates in himself: productive activity. Work, in his eyes, is sacrosanct: hence, his deep respect for every patient effort and his utter contempt for what he terms, sometimes in jest, 'la futilité.' Under this heading he lumps narrative fiction..., philosophy (for him merely an intellectual game...), the theatre... and entertainment such as radio (concerts excepted), magazines and lectures."

⁶Roger Boss, "Alfred Cortot," Schweizerische Musikzeitung, No. 4 (July-Aug. 1962), p. 229.

⁷A.C., p. 206.

⁸Henri-Louis de la Grange, "Le siècle d'Alfred Cortot: un regard sur Cortot," essay in Alfred Cortot - Chopin, EMI (France) 2 C 153-03090-6, 1977, p. 11.

⁹Cortot's son Jean observed that his father "nearly always dominated the situation." He ascribed Cortot's ascendancy over others to his strong personality and "immense self-control and poise." Cortot, although serious and even intimidating at times, was "invariably gracious and very charming,... addressing everyone, whether a celebrity or a member of the house staff, with respect and consideration," he recalled. "Moreover, he had a sense of humor and a sharp wit." Interview with the author, December 1977.

¹⁰Philips, "Cortot Remembered," Clavier, 8 (Nov. 1977), p. 21.

¹¹Cortot's two most arresting features were his intense, "impenetrable eyes which do not look at one but into one" (Ruth Fermoy, "Cortot," p. 266) and "a voice of fire and velvet" (Emile Vuillermoz, cited in A.C., p. 209). Gavoty characterized his famous voice as deep, "majestic and melodious,... richly inflected, shifting from tenderness to causticity..., [and] capable of conveying the most subtle nuances.... Enticing or terrifying, it was quite simply irresistible, and Cortot undoubtedly owed to it a good measure of his appeal and influence" (ibid., p. 211).

¹²Boss, "Alfred Cortot," p. 229.

¹³Cf. A.C., p. 201.

¹⁴Cf. the remark of a very old friend of Cortot's (ibid., p. 123): "Alfred's entire being was consumed by his work, driven by a very noble, very high ambition.... Few men were master of their senses and impulses to the degree he was,... [owing to] an iron will, exercised constantly."

¹⁵It was Cortot's oft-expressed conviction that "all the interest existence holds lies in man's power to create, and then to communicate." What matters about an individual's life, he told Gavoty, "is that [he] had a role, an effect, that something, thanks to him, was furthered, transmitted." (Ibid., p. 213).

¹⁶Alfred Cortot and Bernard Gavoty, Entretiens avec Alfred Cortot, "La Vocation." Further references to this source will be abbreviated as "Cortot/Entretiens," followed by the title of the segment in which the quote occurs. The typescript of these interviews supplied by Gavoty appears to be an aural transcription from a tape recording. Lacunae in the text which cannot be deduced from the context are indicated with an asterisk (*).

¹⁷A.C., p. 25: "J'eus de bonne heure une attirance obscure pour les sonorités et une aspiration instinctive vers la médecine. L'un ne s'exerçait pas au détriment de l'autre. Peut-être même est-ce de cet intérêt pour l'auscultation des corps que j'ai conservé le goût d'interroger les oeuvres."

¹⁸Cortot/Entretiens, "La Vocation."
 B.G.: "Quel a été, en somme, le climat de votre enfance?"
 A.C.: "Je crois pouvoir dire bonne volonté, application studieuse instinctive, et véritable souci de me conformer aux tendres mais sérieuses disciplines familiales qui prétendaient à faire de moi un 'engagé volontaire' dans

l'exercice d'une condition humaine déterminée par une conviction purement hypothétique."

B.G.: "Quels étaient, à votre sens, les dons naturels dont vous disposiez?"

A.C. "Aucun d'ordre musical et digital spécifique. Seuls les éléments de docilité auxquels je viens de faire allusion."

¹⁹Cortot, wrote Boss (op. cit., p. 230), "was always inclined to minimize his natural gifts," an observation confirmed by Yvonne Lefébure and Bernard Gavoty in Alfred Cortot, dir. Edmond Lévy.

²⁰Well into the twentieth century the vocation of artist was idealized and was admired above all others in certain strata of French society. Success in music was thought to guarantee fame, social rank and freedom from routine and material concerns. See Zeldin, Histoire des passions françaises 1848-1945: Orqueil et intelligence [II], especially pp. 337-55.

²¹Both sisters would eventually settle in Paris, where they would teach piano and solfège privately.

²²Cortot/Entretiens, "La Vocation."

²³Ibid.

B.G.: "Qui ont été vos premiers professeurs?"

A.C.: "Mes deux soeurs, et sous * [l'égide?] de la tendresse et de l'imagination. Incomparables, inoubliables initiatrices, qui accordaient à l'apprentissage des notes, à l'interprétation élémentaire des règles du clavier, aux vertus expressives en suspens dans les plus naïves des * mélodiques, aux particularités vivantes des rythmes qui les soutenaient, une constante signification suggestive et imagée qui me faisait oublier le côté impitoyablement abstrait de toutes les notions rudimentaires de la musique pour la situer en marge du réel et dans le domaine d'une sorte de féerie insoupçonnée propre à enchanter une enfance quelque peu rêveuse, m'a-t-on assuré par la suite, et dépourvue de toute espèce de jeux....

Toute ma carrière et tout le développement de mes études ultérieures ont certainement été influencés par cette prise de contact initiale avec la signification secrète des sonorités. Et je lui dois sans doute cette disposition à ce qu'on a parfois qualifié sans complaisance * 'expressionisme' et dont j'ai tenté de faire l'élément essentiel de mes interprétations."

²⁴According to Gavoty (A.C., p. 30), Geneva did not measure up to expectations. The Cortots had imagined it to be alive with cultural and intellectual activity, and found instead a

rather provincial town in which "the atmosphere was complacent, the inhabitants unambitious, the conservatory inadequate."

²⁵Cortot/Entretiens, "La Vocation."

²⁶A product of the French Revolution, the Conservatoire was founded by the Convention in 1795; B. Sarrête was its first director. Enrollment in the latter half of the 19th century varied between 600-950 pupils a year, rising to between 1000-1300 in the first quarter of this century.

²⁷Boss, p. 230.

²⁸Cortot/Entretiens, "La Révélation de la musique."

²⁹Decombes had studied with Pierre Zimmerman at the Conservatoire and had won his premier prix in 1846. After teaching sofège at the school from 1866-75, he was appointed professor of a boys' preparatory class, a post he held until his retirement in 1899.

³⁰Gavoty (A.C., p. 33) reports that Cortot's playing of the Dussek concerto "earned him a relatively favorable critique from the severe Ambroise Thomas [then director of the Conservatoire]: 'Not bad; plays cleanly; adequate sight reading.'"

Chapter II

The Paris Conservatoire and the French School of Piano Playing

Cultural activity in France during the nineteenth century was centralized in the extreme. It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that for musicians, all roads to fame and fortune led to Paris, and if one were an aspiring pianist, to the Paris Conservatoire.¹ Hence, what is not quite correctly referred to as the French school² is virtually identical with the tradition of piano playing cultivated at that institution. As the principal music school of the nation, the Conservatoire benefited from heavy State subsidies; tuition was negligible. In return, class size and overall enrollment were restricted, and the school imposed very rigorous admissions and study criteria, including low quotas on the number of foreigners admitted. Such policies helped preserve its prestige and élitist character.

In line with the prevailing tastes of French culture, the Conservatoire instruction was strongly geared towards the formation of music theatre (opera, operetta) composers and virtuoso instrumentalists, notably pianists and violinists. No attempt was made to provide every pupil with a comprehensive musical training,³ much less a general education and culture, as a matter of course. Rather, it was entirely up to the

individual whether he took other subjects after completing his primary course of study (e.g., piano) or not. If he wished to study another subject at the Conservatoire, he had to pass a stiff entrance examination; otherwise, he could learn with an independent teacher, or on his own. Pedagogy classes, for pupils who might want to learn to teach their instrument, were not instituted until well into the twentieth century. Proficiency in solfège was required of all pupils, however, and the earlier, the better, since it was considered the vital foundation for all higher music learning.⁴

Piano professors at the Conservatoire were expected to train their pupils to be successful concertizing soloists. Hence, they concentrated on teaching the repertoire and inculcating the disciplines strictly necessary in the exercise of that 'métier.' Within the limited objectives they set for themselves they did respectably well, forming pianists who showed a high standard of professionalism and a fine command of the instrument. Critics of the Conservatoire generally conceded that it graduated pianists who knew their craft, but some implied that the level of accomplishment achieved was attributable less to the superiority of the instruction than to the superior talent admitted to the classes. Toward the end of the last century and into the early decades of the twentieth, the Conservatoire was vehemently criticized in various quarters

of the French musical world for turning out "virtuosi" rather than "genuine musicians" imbued with a deep understanding of their art.

Without a doubt, the accent at the Conservatoire was to a greater or lesser degree on technical mastery, or more exactly on mastery of the mechanics of piano playing. The dominant teaching attitude seems to have been: technical accomplishment first and foremost, and if the pupil has sufficient natural musical talent, the rest will come of its own.⁵ Pupils who excelled in the abstract, "measurable" pianistic qualities--velocity, accuracy, evenness (of notes lengths, of tonal intensity), agility--could win a prize in short order, at a very tender age, after which they were set loose to make their way in the Paris music world if they could (and the vast majority couldn't). In Cortot's view, the Conservatoire afforded young pianists at most "a high-quality, but hasty virtuoso training."⁶ Alfredo Casella, who was largely educated at the Conservatoire, concurred:

The Paris Conservatoire, as it has always functioned and as it still functions today [i.e., in 1940], is really a gigantic finishing school.... For example, five years are given to the first part of the piano course and five more... to the advanced course, [each of]... which can be finished in one year if the pupil has the capacity.... The student can be admitted to the school and graduated from it with the same piece, which he will certainly play better on the day of the final competition.⁷

The standard of piano playing at the Conservatoire during Cortot's student years there was quite high, judging from the repertoire played, the many demands for admission from foreign

students and the number of alumni who went on to earn at least national recognition. The formation pianists received was narrow and rigorous, but it was quite effective in conserving and transmitting the values and conventions of the French pianistic tradition.

Three major factors seem to have converged to shape the character of piano teaching at the Conservatoire and maintain it relatively unchanged throughout the last century. In no particular order of importance, they were: 1) the distinctive aesthetic and technical ideals of the école française; 2) the socio-cultural climate of the times and the Conservatoire policies and instructional conditions to which it gave rise; and 3) the educational philosophies and practices of the piano faculty.

The Ecole française de piano

The French style of piano playing evolved out of the already refined keyboard practice of the "clavecinistes," and remained deeply conditioned by its "classic" inheritance throughout the nineteenth century.⁸ By the 1830s, many of the characteristics that came to be identified with a distinctively French style of playing were beginning to crystallize. They can be discerned in the sparkling virtuoso pieces of the composer-pianists of that era--Kalkbrenner, Herz, Hüntten, Heller, Liszt (in his operatic paraphrases, brilliant variations, études) and even Chopin (in the waltzes, for instance)--as well as in the performance values promulgated by

Conservatoire professors. Pierre Zimmerman (1785-1853) and Louis Adam (1758-1848), who both taught at the Conservatoire, are generally considered the forefathers of the "academic" école française. Adam's student Friedrich Kalkbrenner (1785-1853) and to a lesser extent Henri Herz (1803-1888) and Kalkbrenner's pupil Camille Stamaty (1811-1870) seem to have exerted the greatest formative influence on the school.⁹ All could invoke the authority of prestigious performance careers and public adulation in support of their teachings. Paris in the 1830s was the pianistic capital of the world and home to Chopin and Liszt. These two great innovators drew few French virtuosi into their stylistic orbits,¹⁰ however, and neither left a very strong imprint on the type of playing cultivated at the Conservatoire. The basic frame of reference for the école française remained the ideals of fluency, clarity, lightness, precision and technical polish inherited from the claveciniste tradition, together with a growing impulse towards virtuoso bravura and external graces designed to impress a sophisticated but musically uncultured society.

The legacy of the Couperin and Clementi keyboard styles¹¹ was clearly discernible in the classic French piano technique, in which movement and force were generated preponderantly by the fingers, with minimal recourse to the larger playing levers. As a rule, the hand was held close to the keys and the fingers were well curved, a position thought to facilitate a precise, rapid and energetic articulation of the fingers. The

focus was on maintaining a quiet hand, on restricting arm and upper body participation (hence, elbows tucked close to the sides, and little weight on the keys), and on extreme agility and suppleness of the fingers and wrist. Kalkbrenner advocated a controlled, sensitive pressure action of the fingers backed by the hand only if necessary; octaves were to be played from the wrist. The touch had to be light, clean and dexterous, capable of shifting easily from the delicate carezzando or the sparkling jeu perlé¹² to more vigorous and brilliant attacks in forceful passages. A high degree of muscular fixation seems to have been the norm, regardless of dynamic level. The frequent admonitions to maintain flexibility (souplesse) may have been attempts to counter the potential drawbacks of excessive fixation: undue tension and rigidity, percussiveness at higher dynamic levels, a "notey" sound.

All the major stylistic and technical traits of the école française seem to have become ingrained in the playing and Conservatoire teaching to the point of being common practice before mid-century.¹³ Although certain features were later refined or exaggerated by influential exponents (notably Saint-Saëns, the celebrated teacher Antoine Marmontel,¹⁴ and Marmontel's pupils Francis Planté and Louis Diémer), the basic tradition underwent few modifications prior to 1890. During the Second Empire (1852-1871), Paris was decisively eclipsed by

Weimar, Leipzig, Berlin and Vienna as a center of musical innovation. French music "became entrenched in a rather superficial conservatism."¹⁵

In the performance sphere, the Gallic inclination to admire perfection of craft often degenerated into an obsessive preoccupation with the "artisanal" aspects of playing and with brilliant, often gratuitous effects in performance. Teaching took on an increasingly academic aspect, and there was strong pressure--both institutional and societal--to conformism. For many virtuosi and their audiences, what seemed to matter most was not artistic understanding or quality of ideas and feeling but elegance and polish of manner.

While composers began to move away from the facility and frivolity of the previous era soon after 1870, performance practice changed less quickly. In 1930, Cortot noted that French pianists of the 1890s by and large subscribed to the same outlook and repertoire tastes as had their predecessors of fifty years before:

It would not be going too far to say that for a very long time, French pianists were not at all inclined to aim for any lofty, unattainable ideals. For most of them, concerts were nice occasions to demonstrate their virtuosity to a gathering of supportive friends.

In the course of motley and disjointed programs,... [they] reaffirmed the qualities of a piano school still attached to the principles of Herz, Kalkbrenner and Stamaty: ... by a performance full of elegance and brio, by the charm of a phrasing replete with clever effects, by the polish of an irreproachable mechanism.

Perhaps it's ungrateful of me to criticize..., but I must confess that after looking through a volume of recital programs published around 1893 by the Maison Pleyel, I understood why in some countries French pianists still today suffer from a reputation for

superficiality. [There were compositions of] Beethoven, Schumann and naturally of Chopin. Yet one has the distinct feeling that these great names were included in the repertoires of the most popular soloists only so that they could more readily abandon themselves - having thus established their musical respectability - to the ingratiating velocities of a Godard or a Thomé. With rare exceptions, this was the mentality of the public and of Parisian pianists [at the turn of the century]....¹⁶

The Conservatoire Towards the End of the 19th Century:
Policies and Teaching Conditions

The type of schooling young pianists received at the Conservatoire and the socio-cultural milieu in which they had to ply their craft upon graduation were more than a little responsible for the slick and flashy virtuosity and the shameless catering to popular tastes that prevailed in Cortot's youth. As mentioned earlier, Conservatoire pupils had no mandatory courses other than piano study and solfège. Theoretical knowledge, familiarity with styles and with the production of great music beyond the pianistic medium (not to mention much piano literature excluded from school study programs),¹⁷ experience in ensemble playing (chamber music, accompaniment)--all this most pupils had to seek out on their own. There were no general repertoire guidelines to ensure a well-balanced study program of high quality literature from different periods. The only required work for the piano classes was the annual competition piece. If the professor's tastes were reactionary or if he thought his own compositions were the equal of Chopin's, there was nothing to prevent him from assigning pupils a very unbalanced diet of pieces.

The Conservatoire maître gave all his instruction in group (master class) sessions. This format had the advantage of sparing him the tiresome task of having to repeat the same points to every pupil. At the same time, it afforded pupils exposure to much literature beyond that personally studied. As practiced at the Conservatoire, however, the master class system allowed each student very limited contact time with the professor¹⁸ and fostered an instructional atmosphere that was not conducive to thorough inquiry into any individual's special musical or physiological problems.

The trend toward an increasingly narrow musical education for performers can be observed throughout Europe in the second half of the last century. In Paris it was aggravated by institutional policies and social attitudes. Musical talent usually shows very early, and in France the tendency was to start training it intensively as soon as possible--hence the low minimum and maximum age limits postulated for Conservatoire classes. From the time a pupil was admitted to the Conservatoire (often between the ages of seven and ten), he/she usually had no further schooling except in music. Pupils were given a heavy assignment of pieces, études and exercises and spent most of their time practicing; it was not unusual for youngsters in the preparatory classes to log five to eight hours of practice daily. Once a week a pupil might go to an assistant teacher (répétiteur) who would supervise note-learning and technical study, reiterate basic concepts, instil

study habits, etc. Generally he would have only half an hour a week at the piano with the maitre in class (Conservatoire regulations forbade professors from giving private lessons to members of their classes outside of class time), barely enough to receive a few general suggestions and explanations or a demonstration of passages.

The system was clearly designed for the exceptionally talented only. At the same time, it often jeopardized the development of talent to its fullest potential by "forcing the bloom." Winning one's first prize at a tender age was thought to augur for a brilliant career, and the precocious were exhibited in recital young--the public loved a prodigy--and were under considerable pressure to finish their Conservatoire studies in record time, rather than round out their musical education. The emphasis at the Conservatoire was so strongly geared toward solo performance, moreover, that students who wished to study other aspects of performing were sometimes obliged to look outside the school for practical experience. The situation that Isidor Philipp found when, as a pupil at the Conservatoire in the late 1870's he decided to study chamber music, was symptomatic of an attitude that persisted up to Cortot's student days:

There was an ensemble class headed by M. Baillot, a nice old fellow who was the son of the famous violinist. M. Réty [Secretary-General of the Conservatoire]... suggested that I attend it. Baillot was astounded when I showed up. "But sir," he said to me, "my class is a desert. Let's hope you can find some partners now and then anyhow. In the meantime, it may interest you to know that I knew Chopin.... I could tell you about many

other artists who were on close terms with my father." I learned a great deal from him, but his class was indeed a desert: it was not compulsory.¹⁹

Prematurely liberated from his musical apprenticeship on the strength of his playing of a single work, obliged to try to make a name for himself in a Paris music world already surfeited with aspiring virtuosi, a gifted adolescent might easily go awry. Even were he fortunate enough to find additional wise musical and pianistic guidance, there remained the imposing problem of winning recognition. Securing paying concerts and orchestral engagements was extremely difficult without the patronage of powerful musicians or music lovers from the upper social strata. The vital "contacts" needed to get ahead in the artistic world could often be made in the salons of the aristocracy and the haute-bourgeoisie, but serious music was not always given the place of honor. Many young pianists found themselves called upon mainly to provide "entertainment" for wealthy pretenders to culture who only wanted a little music with their conversation, and whose tastes ran to the most trivial and accessible genre pieces.²⁰ If the breaks did not come one's way, the alternatives to a performance career were neither numerous nor nearly as remunerative. Sooner or later, the vast majority of these pianists turned, albeit resentfully, to teaching, which they practiced much as they themselves had been taught.

The feature of the Conservatoire education most virulently criticized by the school's graduates was the policy

of assessing students' merits by competitions (concours). Many decried the negative impact of this system on the academic atmosphere and instruction. Juries admitted or rejected students, and other juries determined whether they deserved to be expelled, kept on or "graduated" largely on the basis of their performance of a few pieces in competitions. So much hinged on the outcome of the annual public concours that intriguing, self-promotion (pre-competition publicity, organizing 'clagues' whose applause might sway the audience and jury) and even vulgar histrionics were not uncommon. Philipp recalled that in his day,

the juries... were composed of nine artists.... Saint-Saëns, Gounod, Stephen Heller, Massenet, Delibes... did not consider it beneath their dignity to adjudicate. Let me add that despite this august assembly, injustices were perpetrated quite frequently.

Students had to compete in full dress attire, [and] their teachers, dressed likewise in tails, sat beside them on stage. I remember my maître Mathias, who ordinarily didn't seem too concerned with whether his class won any honors, elegant, smoothing his sideburns with a little comb... and taking opera glasses from his pocket to follow the reactions of the jury members. I recall the little cries of satisfaction uttered by the audience when a pupil brought off a phrase ending - an "effet" as it was then called - or a brilliant piece of passage work with a flourish.

M. [Antoine] Marmontel spoke to his students, touched their shoulders, made them speed up or slow down and encouraged them audibly. [Félix] Le Couppey,... a consummate actor, mimed the piece, stood up, sat down, sang, and I remember one competition where his gesticulating was so amusing that he was given an ovation and his student, who was quite mediocre, received a first prize!.... Alphonse Duvernoy deserves credit for putting an end to this ridiculous custom.²¹

Two decades later when Cortot came before the juries, the professors were no longer on stage with the pupils, but little

else had changed. Students still put their academic and, to some extent, their career prospects on the line in yearly public competitions, at which they performed a single required piece from the standard literature²² and read at sight a short work composed for the occasion. Debussy, always the reformer, condemned the competitions as "a deplorable way... of acknowledging pupils' achievements. A person may do fine work, and be quite a good student. The day of the competition he happens to be a bit off his form, and he fails. I know of nothing more absurd."²³ Music critic Gaston Carraud delivered one of the most scathing denunciations of the system. Seeing in Fauré's appointment to the directorship the possibility of significant reform, he published an article that began by arguing that critics, relatives and the general public should be excluded from Conservatoire competitions because their presence only "opened the door to machinations and 'playing to the gallery.'" He concluded:

...The concours system... is unfair; it is degrading. It risks destroying in one moment the fruit of years of sacrifices; it favors surface qualities over more profound ones. It is a game, and too often a game at which one cheats....

I am not criticizing at all the instruction dispensed at the Conservatoire, only the influence of the competitions on it.... In any case,... has there ever been what one could call a "Conservatoire teaching"? What elements of it could serve as a basis for discussion? There has been the teaching of Conservatoire professors, some of whom have been, and still are, remarkable pedagogues. But what sort of cohesion has ever existed between their various teachings (doctrines)? What are these traditions so often alluded to? Nothing but anarchy.... I've seen too well how everyone, and most of all music itself, has been hurt by the lack of any method, or rather by the tyranny of a

single method: the preparation of competitions. However honorable the exceptions due to the personal merit and efforts of this or that individual, the whole institution is mesmerized from one end of the year to the other by the competitions, and by the examinations which constitute the preliminary stage of the competitions. The professors stake an amour-propre on them that is still fiercer, and certainly more despicable than [that of] the students. Preparing the competition piece becomes the sole objective of the teaching.... And don't think for a moment that the justification is didactic, that the aim is to impart an understanding of the art. No! The only thing that counts is to play the piece according to current fashion or academic caprice, so that it will win a prize: to play it the way the jury wants it played. It matters little that the candidate knows nothing apart from how to play this piece in a particular way. It matters little that if, by chance, he was capable of showing some spark of originality, that this was quickly snuffed out in order not to offend anyone.... That is unimportant, as long as he becomes a laureat, even at the expense of having his artistic life ruined by this distorted education.²⁴

Carraud's desire to provoke the administration into changing its policies led him to exaggerate somewhat the extent to which competition preparation monopolized thinking and study. Cortot's disciple Blanche Bascourret de Guéraldi (1896-1983), an eminent pedagogue who studied at the Conservatoire from 1909-13 and later served as répétitrice to Lazare-Lévy in one of the school's advanced piano classes, stated that "the competition piece was no doubt the single most important work in the program of studies, but it was never [in the piano classes] the sole focus of the professor's attention. The examination pieces of January and May and the required work for the final competition were three of many pieces learned in the course of a year's study."²⁵ Nonetheless, Carraud's opinion of the detrimental effect of the competition system on the quality

of a pupil's education, and its potential for abuse and injustice, was widely shared.

Cortot felt very strongly that a public competition was an inadequate means of evaluating a pupil's competence because it permitted only "a cursory exhibition of talent, rather than a thorough examination of musicianship."²⁶ The accolades bestowed on those who excelled in the Conservatoire's competitions were, he conceded, of great symbolic and practical value: "For musicians of my generation, a first prize... was a rare badge of quality which opened the doors of the major music societies and powerfully aided young artists in making their debuts."²⁷ Moreover, the individual and class rivalries fostered by the competitions were highly motivating: "the peculiar atmosphere of the Conservatoire, the sort of feverish excitement maintained by the very preparation for the concours,... generated a pride that inspired intensive work."²⁸

Nevertheless, one of the first actions taken by Cortot and Auguste Mangeot upon founding the Ecole Normale de Musique was to abolish the competition system as practiced at the Conservatoire. In its place they substituted broad programs of study geared to various orientations (performance or pedagogy) and levels of advancement (Brevet, Diplôme, Licence), each covering study of a prescribed set of auxiliary subjects in addition to the pupil's principal instrument or discipline. As was the case at the Conservatoire, the student was evaluated in performance before a jury of distinguished professionals or, in

courses such as harmony and counterpoint, by written examination. At the Ecole Normale, however, the public was excluded and the performance examinations were far more comprehensive: the final program for the Licence de Concert, the highest performance degree, usually consisted of seven to ten solo works and a concerto representing a variety of periods and styles. Thus the student had to demonstrate considerable musical and pianistic accomplishment and depth in repertoire. The jury heard large parts of the program, giving the pupil a reasonable time to show--and themselves a fair opportunity to judge--his/her attainments. The ultimate decision of whether an award or diploma was merited was made by weighing in the principal teacher's reports of progress over the year with the results of the final examination. No diploma was awarded until the pupil had successfully passed the final examinations in all the required secondary subjects.

To return to the Conservatoire training, it is likely that the custom of awarding prizes on the basis of performance of a single piece had, in the long run, an adverse effect on the variety if not the quality of programming shown by French pianists of the last century. The works of certain composers were virtually excluded from Conservatoire study programs,²⁹ not merely because they didn't appeal to current Parisian tastes but also because they were less "useful" as training pieces: that is, they gave the pupil little experience in coping with the sort of problems encountered in the typical

competition piece.³⁰ Furthermore, given the decisive importance of the competition, it would be surprising if Conservatoire teachers were not inclined to emphasize those performance values which, in a brief public hearing, gave their pupils an edge: accuracy, technical fluency and showmanship.³¹ Prize-winning students were no doubt gratified by the success they enjoyed with this style in the salons. Only gradually, if at all, did it dawn on some young virtuosi that they might be letting their chance for a truly significant role in music slip away by not developing their deeper artistic gifts.

Piano Teaching at the Conservatoire: Attitudes and Practices

Carraud was surely right in stating that there never was such a thing as a "Conservatoire teaching," if by such he meant a set of didactic methods adhered to by all. Nevertheless, Conservatoire piano teachers as a group did practice much the same type of teaching during the period 1870-1905. From a historical distance, differences of personality, pedagogical merit and teaching style between individuals tend to pale in significance when compared to the many affinities--of culture, of a solid musical tradition with a distinctive normative set of values, and of educational and professional experience--which bound the group together. In order to characterize the Conservatoire approach to teaching, one can in fact draw up a

composite portrait of a maître of that era which in its main lines would be valid for almost any member of the school's piano faculty.³²

The Conservatoire piano professor in Cortot's youth was a Frenchman by birth or naturalization and very likely an alumnus of the school.³³ By choice and training he was first a performer, and second--more often than not--a would-be composer. In actuality, he was likely to be an "armchair" or "annual recital" pianist, having long since abandoned any pretensions to a virtuoso career.³⁴ There were two significant exceptions to this norm: Raoul Pugno (1852-1914), who achieved international fame as partner to Eugène Ysaye and soloist with orchestras,³⁵ and Louis Diémer (1843-1919), who seldom toured abroad but was highly acclaimed in France as a virtuoso. The typical professor had been a "prodigy" of sorts, winning his piano prize in early adolescence and perhaps going on to earn additional prizes in écriture (harmony, fugue, counterpoint, etc.) before the age of twenty. Not infrequently he was a rather cultivated individual; many were from the privileged class or from distinguished musical families. But except for the practical "coaching" experience he might have gained in youth assisting his maître with class instruction, "nothing," as Cortot pointed out, "or very little... in his Conservatoire grounding... prepared him for the moral and pedagogical role he would later exercise."³⁶

As a rule, the turn-of-the-century Conservatoire professor's approach to teaching was instinctive and empirical. He did not analyze either the music or the technical aspects of playing and rarely explained to the pupil exactly how he should go about realizing the desired objectives. Rather, he critiqued the pupil's efforts, and prescribed--or more often, demonstrated at the piano--how the piece was to be played. He tended to be uninformed about learning processes, suspicious of new and unfamiliar ideas, and uninterested in (or perhaps incapable of) analyzing his own playing in detail. He was not one to intellectualize music, still less to theorize about the art of piano playing. His was rather a "tacit" (behaviorists would say, synthetic) mastery of the art, acquired through instinctive adaptation, through emulating authoritative models and through "hands on" experience. Like seasoned professionals everywhere, he was wed to his own way of doing things--the more so since his convictions rested largely on unanalyzable intuitions, and on habits and received beliefs assimilated unconsciously in youth. Paul Loyonnet's description of the teaching of Charles de Bériot will serve to give a notion of the type of instruction dispensed:³⁷

[de Bériot's] main interest was clarity and a singing tone.... He had studied with Thalberg and with Kufferath,... and a singing line was especially important to those musicians. I remember that he often said, "If a singer did what you are doing, one would laugh at him!" He was 65 when I went to him, and he was easily annoyed by his students! Instead of Czerny's [School of] Velocity he put me on the Cramer Etudes, which he

considered more musical;... he rarely made me study Bach. Instead we did pieces by Field, Dussek, Hummel, etc., to develop expression and velocity.

He often showed [at the piano] exactly what he wanted. But aside from working on nuance, he gave little attention to technique per se, thinking... that technique will develop itself through the pieces studied. This in itself is all right if one has good work habits and good preliminary formation of muscles. Unfortunately, he never told me how to organize my practice, and often if I played poorly he would say, "Play it again" - sometimes writing in a fingering.

[At the Conservatoire], in addition to our weekly class we also met on Fridays, which were devoted solely to Bach and Chopin - we each had to learn a new prelude and fugue each week³⁸ and a new Chopin étude, plus a transcendental étude by de Bériot himself! The Friday classes worked all right for the first month,... [but] gradually students stopped coming on Fridays, and he didn't mind, since it was his last year on the faculty and he was pretty detached already.³⁹

Contrary to quite a few professors of that time, de Bériot seems to have been concerned at least mildly with the aesthetic aspects of performance. The inadequacy of his teaching methods, however, made it very difficult for students to realize the aims he posed for them:

With [de Bériot] it was always... interpretation! Slow practice and the quality of one's sound were his main concerns. He never suggested how we might practice in order to play as he wanted or as he illustrated. I remember that a student brought in Mendelssohn's Variations sérieuses, and de Bériot stopped him after the first variation and played up to that point himself, to demonstrate that the top line must be brought out, and then he closed the book and let it be known that the student's 20 minutes were done. For four more weeks the scene was the same for the student!... Another student couldn't get the right sonority for the opening of Weber's Sonata in A flat; he never got further than that page at a class lesson. To do him justice, though, I must say that all [de Bériot's] students developed a taste for good musical "diction," a sense of good pedalling, contrasting touches and clarity in fast tempos.⁴⁰

In technical matters, the typical Conservatoire professor of Cortot's youth tended to adhere closely to the precepts and practices of his teacher and other authorities of the "old school," who based their instruction on a mechanistic concept of piano playing. For this group, writes Eigeldinger, "l'apprentissage de la virtuosité" was equated with a collection of formulas (catalogued in innumerable Méthodes) for attaining a precise position of the hand, the fingers, the forearm, etc."⁴¹ Often a professor's ideas on technique were little more than truisms taken over uncritically from the time of Czerny and before: "finger articulation was the universal panacea,"⁴² and the only way to acquire pianistic accomplishment was through "long hours of finger exercises and stubborn repetition of 'Etudes de mécanisme.'"⁴³ One resolved performance problems by persevering. The idea was "not merely to play the piano, but really to work at it, to exert oneself to the point of exhaustion."⁴⁴ Real mastery was "reserved for the privileged few endowed with exceptional instincts... [and] naturally well-coordinated movements."⁴⁵

Even the eminent pedagogue Isidor Philipp (1863-1958),⁴⁶ who emphasized the need for "working more with the brain than with the fingers, thinking and concentrating more" during practice,⁴⁷ retained much of the old school attitude in his approach to technical training. Philipp believed firmly in the efficacy of large doses of abstract exercises--of which his own exercises de tenues⁴⁸ are a famous example--and études. He was

not averse to assigning twenty or more pages of technical studies each week to a student.⁴⁹ "Philipp wanted us to articulate vigorously, with fingers curved from the tip and with each phalange contributing to a hollowed hand position," recalled Loyonnet.

He had us transpose difficult passages, and of course this gave us better facility in accurate lateral motions. His chief merit was his guidance in choosing the right progressive order of works that a student should study - but not in interpreting them. His ideals were: velocity, jeu perlé and sobriety of expression....

He was not concerned with interpretation. He felt that students should have that already, from their previous professors, so that his only task was to make a kind of "final judgment." Often he was content to say, "C'est bien," or "C'est à retravailler," or "C'est trop dur," or... often to me, "C'est trop lourd." If one asked him to explain these basic criticisms, he would often respond with something sharp, like "Mettez votre tête au bout de vos doigts!" ("Put your head in charge of your fingers!")⁵⁰

The above exemplifies well the type of criticism commonly dispensed: it was judgmental rather than elucidatory. There was often no attempt to analyze the problem or to synthesize the teacher's insights and experiences into general concepts that might promote learning transfer. It is well to keep in mind, however, that the professor of a Conservatoire class dealt with the élite of a whole country. No one expected him to chart out every step, to explain every why and wherefore. Faith in the "authoritarian infallibility of the master"⁵¹ and in the pupil's innate talent and assimilative powers were such that it was considered perfectly natural for him to confine himself to pointing out faults or deficiencies in a pupil's playing and perhaps showing how the piece "should go," without

entering into specifics as to why a performance was inadequate or how the learner should go about conquering particular difficulties encountered in the music or overcoming chronic shortcomings in his playing.

This type of teaching--strongly reliant on mimetic learning (direct emulation of a respected model), formalist in its technical views, dictatorial in tone but neither specific nor lavish with its interpretive counsel--was by no means unique to the Conservatoire. On the contrary, it was more or less the norm in European music schools up to the present century. The pedagogy of a Chopin, a Deppe or a Leschetitzky was the exception that confirmed the rule. The order of the day at most "official" conservatories was to acquire finger virtuosity via reams of progressively graded exercises and études.⁵² Technique was trained to a considerable degree in isolation from musicianship and artistic sensitivity. By 1900, however, leading elements of the teaching profession in many countries were moving away from mechanistic, excessively finger-oriented technical systems as the findings of the analytical pedagogues and the implications of the free, natural piano playing of artists like Liszt and Rubinstein were absorbed. A well-balanced, comprehensive technical system that fosters effective use of the whole physical apparatus, a rational set of study methods, technique as an integral part of, and a means to artistic interpretation rather than a set of

abstract skills (e.g., velocity, power, endurance)--ideas of this kind were transforming the pedagogical art.

At the Conservatoire, piano teaching remained for the most part unaffected by the notions on arm participation, analysis of motions and weight/relaxation that were catching fire in Germany, Russia, England and elsewhere. French pedagogues with few exceptions concentrated heavily on developing craft and disciplines but showed little interest in theoretical technical inquiry, in the neuro-physiological factors conditioning playing, or in the possible application of new findings in educational psychology and learning processes.⁵³ Their principal instructional objective was still clean, rapid and accurate fingerwork.⁵⁴ A few professors, the aforementioned de Bériot for one, stressed a singing legato pressure touch with fingers held close to the keys. But the dominant school of technical thought, the tradition consolidated by Saint-Saëns and Antoine Marmontel, brilliantly represented by Planté and Diémer, and perpetuated well into the twentieth century by such prestigious teachers as Philipp and Marguerite Long--this école française was concerned above all with developing strong, hyper-articulated fingers, a non-weighted touch that frequently leaned toward the semi-legato or non-legato and a finely regulated, transparent tone.

What of the artistic and interpretive teachings dispensed by Conservatoire maîtres? What were the principal tenets of their instruction? One can only guess since very little is

said on the subject in the didactic writings and musical memoirs of the Belle Epoque (1870-1914). Pupils were chastised for "poor taste," were exhorted to listen critically (Diémer, Philipp, Long), to develop a good piano tone (Pugno, de Bériot, Antonin Marmontel, Long) and in a few cases (Diémer, especially) to respect the text. Apart from some general remarks by Philipp,⁵⁵ one looks in vain in French didactic writings of the era for allusions to the notion that musical ends, and the specific musical requirements of the context, dictate the appropriate technical means to be employed. Similarly, there seems to be very little recognition of the fact that stimulating a pupil's desire to render a specific expressive character and sonority will often bring about the appropriate adaptive movements at the keyboard, and consequently will expand his technical skills.

Perhaps these ideas were deemed self-evident and unworthy of mention. That is not the impression one gets reading students' recollections of their lessons, however. To put it crudely, most French piano teaching was "product-centered," i.e., aimed at making the student play the particular work under study better, rather than "concept- or process-centered," i.e., aimed at sharpening the pupil's artistic sensibilities and intellectual faculties, at changing his way of seeing and understanding his task. Granted, this is an invidious and somewhat artificial distinction but one that does reflect the gist of many teachers' comments recalled by Conservatoire

alumni. Pupils were taught to adopt a certain technical approach and to play a work with certain turns of phrase and interpretive conventions because that was what "tradition" dictated.

The Conservatoire played an important role in ensuring the solidity and "purity" of the French tradition of piano playing by its resistance to change and outside influences (until quite recently, only artists trained in the école française were appointed to the faculty). French composers also helped to mould the character of the pianism. With few exceptions--Franck being one--their music did not demand a big, weighty tone, an emphatic rhetoric and expressive means or a symphonic treatment of the instrument, as did the music of the German Romantics, Liszt and the Russian late-Romantics.⁵⁶

More than a few Conservatoire professors seem to have had greater faith in the efficacy of the "system"--the prestige of the school, the rigorous disciplines imposed, the conservatism of its juries, the amount of work a maître could exact, the concentration of musical talent (conducive to fierce rivalries, but also to students inspiring and teaching each other)--greater confidence, that is, in the institution's capacity to form artists and instill traditional values than in their own ability to teach pupils either music or technique. Deep down, they were more than a little skeptical, perhaps justifiably, of the grandiose claims made for education in the latter

nineteenth century,⁵⁷ believing that in matters of art there was precious little that could actually be taught.⁵⁸

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the Conservatoire and its stewardship of the école française is that while the school was dedicated to preserving the status quo in French piano playing and composition, the system and the instruction were not really that constraining on the strong individualist. The very lack of any strict method or closely reasoned pedagogy and the limited contact pupils had with a professor may explain why.⁵⁹ The Conservatoire education fostered conformity to tradition in the majority and may have stifled the development of lesser talents. The really original minds rebelled and struck out on their own. In a curious way, the conservatism of the faculty and the often academic tenor of their instruction seem to have incited the potential innovators to a more radical defiance of convention and a sharper awareness of their own position and aims.⁶⁰ Thus, a Debussy and a Ravel, a Cortot and a Risler, all began their musical exploits on the hard benches of the Conservatoire. Cortot would spend ten years on those benches as a student, and after an interim of a decade he would return to profess at the Conservatoire for a dozen or so more before founding his own music school. The next chapters will trace the path that led him from a schooling which put technique above all to a performance style and teaching "whose whole objective was to make one forget the technical aspects when hearing the music."⁶¹

Chapter II: Notes

¹Until the establishment of the Schola Cantorum in 1896, the only other Parisian music school of quality was the École Niedermeyer (1853) where Fauré was educated, but it existed primarily to train church musicians. See Steven Riggins, "Institutional Change in Nineteenth-Century French Music," Ph.D. Diss. U. of Toronto 1980, pp. 164-69.

²The aesthetic ideals and instrumental technique commonly identified with the école française were by and large not unique to France. They can be discerned in the Italian school and in other "classicist" traditions as well.

³In Bach's day, keyboard lessons amounted to comprehensive music courses. This began to change with the rise of the piano and the professional music schools, which ushered in the virtuoso era. Gerd Kaemper notes in Techniques pianistiques (Paris: Leduc, 1968), p. 14 that in the schooling of pianists, "theory and composition are gradually relegated to a subordinate place..., one consequence [of which] was that they little by little lose the ability to improvise their cadenzas in concerti." Even a lesson with Liszt in 1831 was nothing like a straight piano lesson. "It lasted two to three hours. The Master played... entire pieces..., one discussed literature, philosophy - the whole resembled more a salon than piano study" (ibid., p. 25). The Conservatoire had many writing classes (harmony, counterpoint, fugue, composition), classes in voice, drama, most orchestral instruments, instrumental ensemble, music history (from 1871), keyboard accompaniment (from 1878), etc., but each course was in effect a special discipline (a "major," as we would say). The work required in each was such that they had to be taken consecutively or at most two at a time, rather than concurrently.

⁴The importance attached to mastery of solfège in France persists up to the present day. As a rule, noted Maurice Dumesnil ("Music Study in France: Interview with Maurice Dumesnil," Piano Teacher, 2, No. 5 [May-June 1960], p. 12), "The study of an instrument is preceded by some months of solfeggio training. Thus... beginners find no problems in counting their beats and observing their rests. This basic training at an early age remains for life. It also fixes note relationships, sequences and harmonies. In short it enables one to know what he is doing and facilitates sight reading and the assimilation of new music. Paraphrasing Hans von Bülow's famous dictum on technic, the French teachers might say, "Three things are necessary in order to become a good musician: solfeggio, solfeggio, solfeggio!"

⁵This notion is reiterated by Nadia Boulanger in "Sayings of Great Teachers," Piano Quarterly, No. 26 (Winter, 1958-59), p. 26: "Music is technique," she writes. "One can only be free if the essential technique of one's art has been completely mastered."

⁶Cortot, "De l'enseignement du piano au Conservatoire," Courrier Musical, July 1920, p. 211.

⁷Alfredo Casella, Music in My Time, tr. and ed. Spencer Norton (1941; reprint ed., Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), pp. 30-31.

⁸The dominant French musical tradition tends to conceive of music as "sonorous form." Content is shaped by abstract (i.e., aesthetic and architectonic) values and the logic of articulate discourse more than by individual subjective emotion. Elevation of spirit, liveliness, appropriateness of means to ideas and a clear, elegant manner of expression are prized. There is a general distaste for pathos or any direct, vehement expression of feeling. According to Blume (Classic and Romantic Music, tr. M. D. H. Norton [New York: Norton, 1970], p. 27), a distinctively French idiom was already recognized by the mid-18th century and was "praised for its vivacity,... pleasing quality and easy accessibility - though it was censured for its dryness and schematic cast." These judgments would stand good for French piano playing throughout the 19th century. The ideals of moderation and clarity embodied in the national "Classic" style of Couperin and Rameau continued to be the touchstone for French composers and performers as Romanticism took hold in Germany, despite the fact that Italian opera and German symphonic production (Beethoven especially) enjoyed immense popularity with the French public. Brilliance, accessibility, wit, mastery of craft and stylistic conventions and a fondness for descriptive and pictorial effects characterize French production from grand opera, to Herz and Kalkbrenner, down to Offenbach and Saint-Saëns. A strong strain of Enlightenment aesthetics can be discerned in the notion of many French musicians that music has the right to set itself a specific, even modest purpose (to illustrate a text, to entertain and amuse), which may explain the current of facile craftsmanship evident in light opera, piano salon music and much French piano playing before 1890. Only the emergence of Wagner and the symbolist-impressionist movement caused French music and music-making to deviate significantly from the course described above.

⁹Native French creative energies were at a low ebb in this period, so it is perhaps not surprising that three of the key figures in the early French piano school had ties with Austro-Germanic culture. Adam was from Muttersholz, Kalkbrenner was born near Kassel (Germany) and Herz was a native of Vienna.

These artists introduced elements from other classical piano schools into the French harpsichord-derived tradition. Both Kalkbrenner and Herz studied with Clementi, and Herz also worked with Moscheles and Hüntten. Stamaty passed on Kalkbrenner's technical ideas (he taught Saint-Saëns and Louis Moreau Gottschalk, among others) and authored didactic materials widely in use up to the end of the last century.

¹⁰Chopin taught many French pianists, but of these only George Mathias (1826-1910) made a professional career and had ties with official music circles. Although formed in part by Kalkbrenner, Mathias may have passed on aspects of Chopin's keyboard approach to pupils in his Conservatoire class. Another Chopin pupil, Mme. Camille O'Meara-Dubois, achieved distinction mainly as Debussy's teacher. Liszt, curiously enough, had no major French pianist or teacher among his students, though his influence can be detected in the composition styles of Saint-Saëns and Alkan.

¹¹See François Couperin, L'Art de toucher le clavecin (The Art of Playing the Harpsichord), ed. A. Linde, tr. Mevanwy Roberts (1716; reprint ed. Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1933) and Muzio Clementi, Introduction to the Art of Piano Playing (1803; reprint ed. New York: Da Capo Press, 1973).

¹²Reginald Gerig, in Famous Pianists and Their Technique, p. 315 credits Kalkbrenner with inventing the carezzando, a touch where "the key is stroked by the finger from about the middle to the front edge,... [and] is thus very gently depressed." The jeu perlé was a quicker drawing under (or gliding, if more legato was desired) of the finger tips toward the palm to produce a distinct and fluent "string of pearls." It was not unique to the French school. Hummel, Czerny and other exponents of classical styles used and taught it. It was probably a legacy of the harpsichordists; Forkel describes a touch very like it in his account of Bach's technique.

¹³Cf. Kalkbrenner, Méthode pour apprendre le Piano à l'aide du Guide-Mains, Op. 108 (Paris: Meissonnier, 1830); Czerny, Complete Theoretical and Practical Piano Forte School, Op. 500, II (London: R. Cocks, 1893), especially "On the Various Styles..."; Oscar Bie, A History of Pianoforte and Pianoforte Players (1899; reprint ed. New York: Da Capo, 1967); Antoine Marmontel, Histoire du piano et de ses origines (Paris: Heugel, 1885) and Les Pianistes célèbres (Paris: Heugel, 1878).

¹⁴Marmontel (1816-1898) studied under Zimmerman at the Conservatoire and succeeded his teacher as professor of the most important advanced class for men. He reigned there from 1848-1887, acquiring enormous prestige because of the brilliant pianism of his pupils Planté and Diémer and the fame of other

pupils (Albeniz, Debussy, Bizet, d'Indy.) He and his students seem to have intensified the emphasis on hyper-articulated, fast, clean and emotionally restrained playing.

¹⁵Serge Gut and Danièle Pistone, La Musique de chambre en France de 1870 à 1918 (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1978), p. 19.

¹⁶Cortot, "En Souvenir d'Edouard Risler," Monde Musical, 41, No. 6 (June 30, 1930), pp. [221]-222.

¹⁷Though a chair in history was established in the 1870's, the music history course was not required until 1905.

¹⁸Professors were required to teach only six hours a week (three 2-hr. or two 3-hr. sessions), a policy that probably stemmed from budgetary constraints rather than philosophical convictions. With 12 students in the class, each pupil received half an hour per week of instruction--assuming the maître gave all his lessons (many didn't), showed no favoritism, and allotted none of the class time to his auditors.

¹⁹Philipp, "Le Conservatoire National de Musique" (reminiscences), Monde Musical, 51, No. 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1940), p. 21.

²⁰Not all the salons were like this. Some featured high quality music-making and first hearings of contemporary works, and were attended by distinguished figures from the arts. See H. H. Stuckenschmidt, Maurice Ravel, tr. S. Rosenbaum (London: Calder & Boyars, 1969), pp. 44-48 for a description of the salon of Mme. de Saint-Marceaux at the turn of the century. The Princesse de Polignac, née Winifred Singer, later subsidized many an impoverished artist and worthwhile project.

²¹Philipp, "Le Conservatoire....," p. 21.

²²From 1897 to 1906 the required competition repertoire consisted of two pieces (in the men's advanced classes, usually a movement from a Beethoven sonata and a romantic work), but then the policy of a single obligatory work was reinstituted. The concours retained this form until the 1940's.

²³Debussy, in an interview with Maurice Leudet that appeared in Le Figaro, Feb. 14, 1909. A full English translation appears in François Lesure, ed., Debussy on Music, tr. Richard Smith (New York: Knopf, 1977), pp. 236-39.

²⁴Carraud, "Pour le Conservatoire," Mercure Musicale, July 15, 1905, pp. 198-99.

²⁵Blanche Bascourret de Guéraldi, interview with the author, May 1978.

²⁶Cortot, "De l'enseignement du piano au Conservatoire," p. 212.

²⁷Cortot/Entretiens, "La révélation de la musique."

²⁸Cortot, "De l'enseignement...", p. 212.

²⁹In an editorial in the Monde Musical, 20, No. 11 (June 15, 1909), p. 164, Mangeot noted that a prize-winning pianist of the 1890s "confessed to me that he left the Conservatoire knowing absolutely nothing of Schubert, Schumann and Bach."

³⁰Louis Diémer, for instance, won his greatest success performing works of the clavecinistes, but from the reminiscences of students it would seem that he rarely assigned any early keyboard music apart from an occasional Bach transcription.

³¹Of course, the competitions did not create these values, which were traditional to French keyboard practice, but they reinforced the extreme importance placed on them.

³²See René Dumesnil, "L'enseignement," in L. Rohozinski, ed. Cinquante ans de musique française: de 1874 à 1925 (Paris: Librairie de France, 1925); Kullak, The Aesthetics of Pianoforte Playing; Constant Pierre, Le Conservatoire National de Musique et de Déclamation: Documents historiques et administratifs (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1900); Eigeldinger, Chopin..., pp. 30-33, 236-37 (on Mathias); Antoine Marmontel, Les Pianists célèbres; Camille Bellaigue, quoted in Edward Lockspeiser, Debussy: His Life and Mind (New York: Macmillan, 1962), p. 26 (on Marmontel); I. Philipp, Quelques considérations sur l'enseignement du piano (Paris: Durand, 1927); Paul Bertrand, Le Monde de la musique (Geneva: La Palatine, 1947), especially pp. 220-27 (on Philipp, Duvernoy, Diémer, Pugno); Alberto Bachmann, Le Piano, ses maîtres et ses ancêtres (Paris: 1955), esp. Henri Cliquet-Pleyel on Pugno.

³³The only professors who did not receive their pianistic training at the Conservatoire were Georges Mathias (1826-1910), who studied privately with Keller, Kalkbrenner and Chopin; Eraim-Miriam Delaborde (1839-1913), who studied first with Ch. M. V. Alkan, then with Moscheles and Henselt, and Charles de Bériot (1833-1924), who studied with Thalberg and Kufferath (a pupil of Mendelssohn). In short, there is some diversity of pianistic background until the generation of 1840; after that, the Conservatoire hires its own.

³⁴Henri Fissot (184?-1894) and Alphonse Duvernoy (1843-1913) both won their piano prizes very young but soon turned to composing--not very successfully--for the theatre, and teaching. Neither Marmontel père (Antoine) nor his son Antonin, nor Charles de Bériot were more than mediocre pianists. Decombes and Philipp were said to have given up promising careers to concentrate on teaching. Philipp could still play quite respectably when he was past ninety.

³⁵Pugno taught piano only five years at the Conservatoire (1896-1901), before resigning to devote more time to concertizing.

³⁶Cortot, "De l'enseignement...", p. 211.

³⁷Loyonnet (1890-), studied with de Bériot from age ten through his first year of Conservatoire study (i.e., 1900-1904), then with Isidor Philipp and Martinus Sieveking (a Leschetitzky student). He has lived in Montreal, Canada since the 1950s and teaches at McGill University.

³⁸Bériot's inclusion of Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier in the study program of his advanced-level class was rather untypical of Conservatoire teaching in that era.

³⁹Charles Timbrell, "An Interview with Paul Loyonnet," Journal of the American Liszt Society, 19 (June 1986), pp. 115-16.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 117.

⁴¹Eigeldinger, Chopin..., p. 30.

⁴²Boss, "Alfred Cortot," p. 230.

⁴³Kaemper, Techniques pianistiques, p. 23.

⁴⁴loc. cit.

⁴⁵Kaemper, p. 24.

⁴⁶Philipp, born in Hungary, came to Paris as a child and studied with Saint-Saëns and Georges Mathias, from whose class he graduated with a 1^o prix. Professor of an advanced piano class for forty years, he formed many distinguished artists, including Guiomar Novaës, Nikita Magaloff, Ania Dorfman and Jeanne-Marie Darré.

⁴⁷Philipp, Quelques considérations sur l'enseignement du piano (Paris: Durand, 1927), p. 6.

⁴⁸See Philipp, Exercises for Independence of the Fingers (New York: Schirmer, 1917).

⁴⁹Blanche Bascourret de Guéraldi, interview with the author.

⁵⁰As quoted in Timbrell, "...Paul Loyonnet," pp. 118-19.

⁵¹Walter Robert, "Four-Way Piano Teaching: Criticism, Demonstration, Analysis, Inspiration," in Teaching Piano, ed. Denes Agay (New York: Yorktown Press, 1981), II, p. 605.

⁵²See Amy Fay, Music Study in Germany (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1880), especially pp. 21, 39-40, 264 and 318 for descriptions of the teaching practiced at Lebert and Stark's Stuttgart Conservatory, Tausig's Conservatory in Berlin and the Neue Akademie der Tonkunst (Berlin).

⁵³There was deep suspicion in the 19th century that art might be profaned or killed by science: that to make too extensive a use of the rational and analytical faculties would paralyze the subjective sensibilities. The French aversion to conscious inquiry into technique and teaching methodology may have been aggravated by the strong reaction to positivism (which led many to extol the autonomy of the individual artist) and by widespread opposition after 1870 to any musical initiatives emanating from Germany.

⁵⁴By 1886 Deppe and other pioneers of modern technical thought (Clark-Steiniger, Klose) were publishing their ideas. In the 1890s Godowsky, Busoni and Carreño began advocating weight and relaxation approaches. Soon after, the major early analytical texts--Caland (1897), Mason (1897), Bandmann (1903) and the very influential Breithaupt (1905)--appeared. The only contemporaneous figure in France pursuing research along these lines was the distinguished Alsatian pianist Marie Jaëll. Her writings, leavened with metaphysical speculations, focussed excessively on the tactile sense (which she apparently confused with the kinaesthetic) and the finger tips. Jean Huré's book (1910) divulged Deppe's ideas as gleaned from Amy Fay's writings. The next French works containing analytical or psycho-physiological ideas date from after the war (Selva and Morpain, both 1922). None of these French authors made substantial original contributions to the sum of modern technical knowledge. Only one, Morpain, was associated with the Conservatoire.

⁵⁵See Philipp, Exercices quotidiens tirés des oeuvres de Chopin (Paris: Hamelle, 1897) and Quelques considérations sur l'enseignement du piano.

⁵⁶Cf. Loyonnet, as quoted by Timbrell ("...Paul Loyonnet," p. 120): "The Russians and Germans have always used more (weight

and arm), and the reason is that their music demands it; composers engender the education of interpreters. For the French, there can be grandeur without heaviness and passion without violence."

⁵⁷Cf. Zeldin, Histoire des passions françaises....: Orgueil et intelligence, Ch. IV ("Education et Espoir"), pp. 159-200.

⁵⁸Paul Bertrand, in Le Monde de la musique, p. 220 reports that Alphonse Duvernoy "asserted, not without humor, that the only true professor is the one who first places the pupil's hands on the instrument;... after that the professor of an advanced class can count on the technical merit of the student,... guaranteed by the entrance competition, and on his sense of style, and can limit his [didactic] intervention to a few vague suggestions."

⁵⁹See Riggins, "Institutional Change in Nineteenth-Century French Music," especially Chapter VIII, pp. 261-80.

⁶⁰Roger Shattuck points out in The Banquet Years (New York: Vintage Books, 1968) p. 42, that it is precisely "the great reservoir of conservatism and indifference in the French which has sustained a dynamic culture" that produces both radical innovators and zealous reformers.

⁶¹Reine Gianoli, interview with the author, May 1978.

Chapter III

Cortot's Studies at the Conservatoire (1887-1896)

Decombes' Class

Having passed the preparatory level entrance exam on his second try, in November 1887 Cortot was accepted as a full-fledged member of the class of Emile Decombes (1829-1912).

Louis Fleury in his "Souvenirs d'un flûtiste" wrote that during the eighteen-nineties,

the resident dunces [in the preparatory division] were assigned to a decent fellow named Anthiome,... [while] the brilliant ones went to Papa Decombes.... In short, the real - the only - preparatory class for boys was the Decombes class. One can never speak well enough of this admirable educator, through whose hands passed most of the pianists or composers of my generation and the preceding one.¹

Decombes, in whose class Cortot spent five long years, is sometimes referred to as a pupil of Chopin. According to Cortot, he was "not a student of Chopin in the strictest sense of the word, but [one who] had the honor of playing for him a number of times."² Decombes' immediate concern was always to equip his students with a fluent finger technique and a solid foundation of pianistic skills. In his class, Cortot recalled,

I hardly need say that there was no question of approaching the piano from the standpoint of poetic imagination that had enriched my early study with my sisters. Now it was a matter of mastering the many technical difficulties through daily confrontation with the treacherous imbroglios of [Clementi's] Gradus ad

Parnassum, which is appealing only when it is caricaturized by Debussy... at the beginning of the Children's Corner Suite.³

For Cortot the path to instrumental accomplishment was slow and arduous. "Years went by before I could cut an honorable figure among my peers,"⁴ he later stated. "I had poor piano hands; [they were] recalcitrant, sluggish until really warmed up, awkward back then."⁵ "I had a small stretch [and] weak fingers.... I worked so hard... that eventually I overcame certain of these deficiencies."⁶ Former classmates agree that what impressed them most in the young Cortot were not his pianistic gifts but rather his intense nature and the zeal with which he applied himself to his studies. "When I think of Cortot," wrote Joseph Morpain (1873-1961),⁷ a fellow member of Decombes' class from 1886-1889,

the earliest picture that comes to mind is that of a small boy with dark eyes, black hair and a dusky complexion, serious and reflective.... How old was he? Ten, perhaps, and to outward appearances he gave no sign of being a child prodigy. It was by virtue of his intelligence and conscientiousness that he stood out from the rest at that time. His unfailing musicality also caught our attention.⁸

Morpain's recollection is essentially confirmed by that of Jean Gallon (1878-1959), another classmate of Cortot's and later a professor of harmony at the Conservatoire. According to Gallon, Cortot always came to class

accompanied by his two older sisters,... who dedicated themselves to him with a sort of religious devotion.... Though just a child, he impressed us by his serious and concentrated air. Thinking back, I recall his expressive features..., his will (volonté) strained like a bow and his fanatical application. When the maitre made a remark about a piece just performed, [Cortot] would stare at him

wide-eyed and move his lips as though reciting the advice to himself. Later, in Diémer's class, his personality rapidly began to assert itself. His naturally beautiful sonority delighted us, and his tonal palette was continually acquiring new colors, which he seemed to invent just to amaze us. I could never listen to him play without being moved....⁹

Decombes loved music, and he loved working with youngsters. His pupils quickly sensed this and reciprocated in kind. Like most "old school" professors, Decombes had no set method. He focussed on the pupil's immediate performance problems, offering practical tips drawn from his rich fund of teaching experience and abundant illustrations at the keyboard. In contrast to many of his contemporaries, Decombes was patient, supportive and indulgent almost to a fault.¹⁰ "It would surprise me to hear that strict discipline was the means by which he obtained his successes," wrote Fleury. "He was indeed the most gentle and kind-hearted of souls,... [a] saint --those who knew him well will not contradict me."¹¹

Decombes was not only a kindly man, he was also a keen observer of human nature. He knew how to kindle enthusiasm and build confidence by setting specific tasks that would challenge the learner without overstraining his abilities. His positive attitude and personal warmth inspired great affection and elicited pupils' best efforts. Composer and critic Reynaldo Hahn provided a vivid description of Decombes' teaching in his 1912 eulogy:

Cheerful, tolerant, full of paternal affection,...
[Decombes] was not only an excellent and charming man, he was also a fine professor... [with] a natural flair for teaching....

No teacher was ever less talkative, gave fewer explanations, was more averse to high-flown words and theoretical discourses. When a new student auditioned, (Decombes) had him play "his piece," listened good-naturedly while observing him, ... occasionally nodding approvingly, murmuring from time to time: 'nice, nice' (...at first he only stressed the good qualities of the aspirant). Then if he accepted the student, he took an enormous blue or red pencil and wrote several titles on a note pad: "Here is what you should work on for the next lesson... very slowly, lifting each finger, striking like this, like this!" and on his open left hand, or even on the pupil's chest, he placed his right hand and, lifting his fingers and then bringing them down one after the other, gave an admirable and very simple demonstration of the playing mechanism. This lasted a few seconds, and it sufficed. The pupil came away with an oversized example of what his small hand should imitate emblazoned on his memory, and this image was worth more to him than a mass of confused injunctions and lengthy recommendations concerning the position of the body, the angle of the arm vis à vis the keyboard and the curve of the first phalanx would have been....

The natural, effortless position of this huge white hand implied relationships and proportions which the pupil obeyed at first without questioning, unconsciously assimilating these laws to his own nature and special physical means, thus fulfilling the first aim of Decombes - which was to not force or modify in any way the personality of the student - when, of course, he deemed it worthy of respect.

Decombes was in the habit of assigning easy exercises and difficult pieces to his new students. Why, I don't know. Nor do I have any idea why this procedure gave such excellent results. What is certain, is that at first one progressed very fast, which pleased the pupil and gave him courage and self-confidence, resulting in further advances.

Rarely did Decombes criticize a student or really reprove him. While one played he listened, often approving with a word or a nod, or gently chiding: 'Watch out! The hands aren't quite together, my friend,' or 'Come on, clearly now, let's not rush...', etc., but seldom going so far as to stop the student. [The student] grew quite aware while he played - perhaps for the very reason that he was not ever stopped - of the weak or bad spots in his performance, pointed out en passant with a barely reproachful good-naturedness, while other passages prompted an almost continuous stream of compliments....

But how can one give an idea in precise, descriptive terms of a system that was not properly speaking a system

at all, and which consisted entirely of a personal influence as powerful as it was gentle? I am sure that if one asked the innumerable students of Decombes how... [he] made talent grow and blossom within them, how they took from him a taste for elegance and expression, by what means he developed in them a love for music, instilled in them an equal aversion to the narrow, dry formalism of some pianists and the empty grandiloquence of others...., they would be very hard put to answer.¹²

Decombes seems to have arrived intuitively at insights into the psychology of learning that eluded most professors of his day. He understood that many times the performance difficulties experienced by a gifted child are not physical (muscular, coordinational) but "mental" in origin (that is, arising from faulty learning habits, poor concentration, emotional insecurities or anxiety-related tension) and that these problems can be alleviated or overcome by psychological tactics and wise guidance. The cleverness with which Decombes combined criticism with ample positive reinforcement, the way he inculcated self-discipline and critical listening skills while keeping to a minimal-intervention "coaching" that accustomed the pupil to actual performance conditions--all this is a refreshing contrast to the harsh, dictatorial tactics employed by many nineteenth-century teachers.

Since the Conservatoire made little provision for public performances by students other than the annual competition for prizes,¹³ Decombes organized private class recitals to give his pupils incentive to perfect their pieces and valuable performance experience. Usually a professor from one of the advanced piano classes at the Conservatoire would be invited to

attend and offer comments and criticism. According to Cortot, a frequent guest of honor at the recitals was Georges Mathias, "an authentic student of Chopin,... which fostered in us the proud and naive illusion that under this double aegis [of Decombes and Mathias] we were carrying on the tradition of an incomparable pianistic style!"¹⁴ In those years Decombes' class had no dearth of promising talents, as can be seen from a program for a student recital held the second of June, 1889:¹⁵

Moscheles	Concerto No. 3 [Op. 58]	-	Maurice Ravel
Hummel	Sonata in A ^b major	-	Jean Gallon
Ries	Concerto No. 3 [Op. 55]	-	Raoul Laparra ¹⁶
Weber	Sonata in A ^b major	-	Georges Haas ¹⁷
Hummel	Concerto in A ^b major [Op. 113]	-	Lucien Wurmser ¹⁸
Herz	Concerto No. 5, Op. 180	-	Camille Decreus ¹⁹
Chopin	Concerto No. 2 [Op. 21]	-	Joseph Morpain
Chopin	Concerto No. 1 [Op. 11]	-	Reynaldo Hahn
Herz	Concerto No. 3 [Op. 37]	-	Alfred Cortot
Lavignac	Galop-marche [1 piano, 8 hands]	-	MM. Decreus, Wurmser, Haas and Cortot

"The study of a repertoire which consisted largely of works of Hummel, Field, Moscheles and other composer-pianists of the early nineteenth century," Cortot noted,

taught [us]... the qualities of this bel-canto style [of writing] which, though making ample use of conventional figuration - arpeggios, trills, brilliant scales and similar outmoded artifices (called back then "tours d'adresse"²⁰) - retained nonetheless the basic principles of a sensitive lyrical declamation.... Decombes, for his part, showered us with musical examples of these [principles], played with a delightfully graceful and elegant touch....

He often recounted his impressions of [Chopin's]... playing, stressing its amazing rhythmic equilibrium - quite the opposite of the erroneous notion of an effeminate rubato which [partisans of] a maudlin sentimentality (I refuse to dignify it with the word "sensitivity") today assume to be the genuine one. [Chopin] gave the left hand the role, in the Polish

master's own words, of "maître de chapelle": it was always supposed to keep the basic rhythmic pulse, though without hindering the free vocal delivery of the melody line in the right hand.²¹

Despite intensive study, Cortot failed the preparatory piano and solfège final examinations in both 1888 and 1889.

"In 1890," wrote Gavoty, "a third place medal (dernier nommé)²² enabled him to just barely escape the axe of automatic expulsion."²³ After this shaky beginning he gradually found his stride and began to justify Decombes' high opinion of his abilities. A transcript of his grades, assembled from records in the Conservatoire archives,²⁴ attests to his perseverance and steady, hard-won gains:

Report of Emile Decombes

Examination of 18 January 1888 10 years 3 months, 1st year (Hummel: Sonata in E^b, 1st movement). Very well organized child, musically and pianistically; superb hands,²⁵ beautiful tone; a worker.

Exam. 8 June 1888 (Moscheles: Concerto No. 3). Good organization, good hands; very studious pupil, very promising; has progressed enormously since the start of the school year; is strong enough to compete.²⁶

Exam. 16 January 1889 (competed [unsuccessfully] in 1888) (Ch. Mayer: 2nd Allegro de concert). Very studious and courageous pupil, who is an absolutely tireless worker; in time will gain in lightness; has [good] sound and feeling.

Exam. 13 June 1889 (Herz: Concerto No. 3). Progressing well, practices a lot; still a little heavy; will do just fine. A promising student, very intelligent.

Exam. 27 January 1890 (Ferd. Hiller: Sarabande). This young student has made amazing progress since last year. He has everything going for him: power, tone, feeling; and on top of it, he's a hard worker.

- Exam. 12 June 1890 [?] ([Julius] Schulhoff: Sonata). Very interesting pupil, a worker; beautiful sonority, good fingers, good musical feeling. [Has] a great future.
- Exam. 26 January 1891 ([?]). Cortot has made a lot of progress. Very hard-working student, very diligent and remarkably gifted. Beautiful tone.
- Exam. 11 June 1891 2^e Médaille (Guiraud: Allegro). Has made enormous progress. Very solid playing mechanism. Student with a great future, very good musician.
- Exam. 18 January 1892 (Hummel: Sonata in F#, Finale). Very good fingers. A great deal of strength and warmth.
- Exam. 11 June 1892 1^o Médaille (Beethoven: Sonata in C major, "l'Aurore" [i.e., "Waldstein"]). Very remarkable student. Good articulation. Ardent and colorful playing, very intelligent.

Report of Paul Rougnon [Solfège-Instrumentistes class]

- Exam. 4 January 1889 (11 years 3 months, first year) Very gifted. A promising student.
- Exam. 31 May 1889 Excellent pupil. Charming personality and quite talented.
- Exam. 6 January 1890 (competed in 1889) Remarkable student.
- Exam. 2 June 1890 3^e Médaille Exceptionally gifted student. A good musician and a worker.
- Exam. 5 January 1891 Excellent student; a worker, a good musician and very talented.
- Exam. 1 June 1891 1^o Médaille Charming disposition. A remarkable subject.

Notes of Ambroise Thomas²⁷ on the solfège examinations

- Exam. 6 January 1890 Dictation: B28 Theory: B
- Exam. 5 January 1891 Dictation: TB Theory: B
- Exam. 1 June 1891 Dictation: TB Theory: B Sightreading: B

In June of 1892 Cortot at last won his première médaille in piano. On November 7 of that same year he passed the second and final round of the advanced division entrance competition and was accepted into Louis Diémer's class. Looking back on this first phase of his apprenticeship, he said: "Although I earned the diplomas with which I could hope to enter the advanced division only after attaining a rather dubious seniority,... I in no way regret this slow, character-building formation."²⁹ Cortot, in Morpain's words, had "progressed by leaps and bounds... in the supportive atmosphere [of the preparatory class]."³⁰ Decombes' guidance and Cortot's hard work no doubt brought about much of that improvement--but Cortot was also receiving help from another quarter. It is from ca. 1890 that one can date his association with an artist who profoundly influenced his musical development and aesthetic views: Edouard Risler (1873-1929).³¹

In order to make best use of the meager time allotted each pupil in the class, professors in both the preparatory and advanced divisions often relied on répétiteurs, i.e., assisting teacher-coaches who prepared pupils for class lessons, drilled them in sight-reading and frequently oversaw much of the technical training. Those of Decombes' pupils who needed extra instruction--and most were told they did--took a private tutoring session with a répétiteur once a week in addition to their class lessons.³² In some classes, especially the girls' classes, the répétitrices were seasoned teachers, many of whom

took this humble post in the hope that it would give them an inside track for an eventual full appointment to the faculty. Decombes, however, preferred to draw his assistants from among the recent graduates or senior members of Louis Diémer's class, to the great good fortune of Cortot, who was sent to Edouard Risler. In Risler, he found not only a conscientious coach but an inspiring role model who in time became his dearest friend.

Risler, a protégé of Diémer, had won his premier prix in piano in 1889 and was considered one of the brightest young talents of the day. From his graduation until about 1897, when his career took off, he spent much of each year in Paris. He practiced furiously, coached pupils of Decombes and Diémer, studied harmony and accompaniment at the Conservatoire and performed frequently in the fashionable music salons. During those years he also frequented Bayreuth during the summer³³ and made numerous trips to Berlin and Dresden to pursue further piano study with three noted Liszt disciples, Eugène d'Albert, Karl Klindworth and Bernard Stavenhagen.³⁴

Risler worked with the young Cortot fairly regularly until at least 1895. He was more than just a répétiteur to Cortot; in effect, he made Cortot his protégé. He supervised Cortot's piano study, counselled him on artistic and personal matters, explored the symphonic and operatic literature with him and helped him make social and professional contacts. By the example of his modesty and perfectionism, Risler instilled in Cortot a profound reverence for the masterworks of his art

and inspired him to aim for lofty goals: depth and integrity of musical expression, richness of tonal imagination and complete musicianship (he himself was an excellent score reader and chamber musician). He encouraged Cortot to familiarize himself with the newest music, to sightread extensively³⁵ and to master the essentials of theory. The following letter from the adolescent Cortot suggests the extent of Risler's concern for his progress:

Tuesday July 22, 189[?]³⁶

My dear Risler,

I assure you we were all quite touched, and myself in particular, by your kind letter. Thank you for taking such an interest in me.

I'm so glad that I'll be able to resume my lessons with you this winter, since I need your good advice very much for my piano and my harmony.

Thanks very much for offering to correct my homework, but I don't want to bother you with this chore yet, the more so since during the month of the competition I didn't study either Reber or Dubois much. To give you an idea of what I've done, I'm only now on 7th chords. I'm going to start again in earnest, however.

We are all having a marvelous vacation here, and let me tell you the time seems to fly by. Until now I've been practicing two hours a day, and afterwards I run through the woods and fields all day long. Now I'm really going to get down to work.

I'm studying [Liszt's] La Campanella [and] St. François de Paule, Bach, Beethoven, Chopin études - in short, all the usual stuff.

I'm so pleased to hear what you've been working on this summer; I'm sure it will be superb.

We read in the Monde Musical that M. Edouard Risler was among the concert artists going to Chicago. The well-informed reporter who wrote that congratulated the brilliant young virtuoso on his interesting artistic venture.³⁷

I think that despite this awful blooper you might receive my letter in Dresden.

Mama is much better; she and my sisters send you their kindest regards.

I'll say goodbye now, dear Risler, thanking you once again for your charming letter and sending you a hearty handshake.

Your devoted A. Cortot

Villars (par Tournus) Saône et Loire³⁸

It was Risler who prepared Cortot for the advanced level entrance examinations, as a letter from Léa Cortot written shortly before the 1892 concours reveals:

Paris, October 29 [1892] 32, rue des Marais

My dear Risler,

I can't tell you how happy your little note made us and I thank you from the bottom of my heart for having thought of us at the crucial moment. M. Diémer, whom we have just been to see, told us how warmly you recommended my brother to him. We've also just learned from him that you are going to play for [Anton] Rubinstein. Try hard to be a little more amiable with him than you are with us ordinary mortals, because you have a way of receiving compliments that is hardly encouraging, let me tell you, and you've managed thus far to deter me from expressing my admiration. Also, could you give us all the details of the audition which show you in a good light, without worrying about appearing immodest? I'd very much like to know what you are going to play, and to be present invisibly at your triumph.

In compensation, we are going to hear M. Diémer tomorrow at the Lamoureux concerts, and we're very happy about that since it's the first time we'll hear him play solo.

I don't dare think that Fate will cross us. The exam will take place the 7th of November; still another week of doubt and anguish, for it seems that the drawing of lots is settled.³⁹ I don't know what else I can do to bolster our chances. I think, however, that we have every reason to make a good showing, since you have looked after my brother until now. He is going to audition with the Chopin finale that you coached him on. I'm sure he would work incredibly hard if he was admitted to M. Diémer's class, especially if he kept studying with you, whom he reveres. Well, let's wait and see what happens, and hope that God is merciful. If all goes

well, we'll let you know right away; if not, I don't know if I'll have the nerve to break the news to you.

See you soon, and once again, a thousand times thanks my dear Risler, for the affectionate concern you never cease to show us.

L. Cortot⁴⁰

Diémer's Class

In November of 1892 Cortot was admitted, along with only seven other boys, to the advanced piano division. Louis Diémer (1843-1919), in whose class he was placed, was one of the reigning stars of the Paris pianistic world. A pupil of Marmontel, Diémer had been a remarkable prodigy, winning first prizes in piano (at age thirteen), harmony, accompaniment, counterpoint and fugue. While still in his 'teens he had begun touring, to considerable success.⁴¹ Diémer was a wizard of the keyboard "blessed with a despairingly, inexorably irreproachable technique. His mechanical skill was such that one waited--almost hoped--for a wrong note, a human, reassuring slip. But one never escaped the pitiless perfection."⁴² While Diémer was widely ranked with Planté as one of the greatest virtuosi of the école française,⁴³ critical opinion concerning his artistic merits was divided.⁴⁴ "He was applauded everywhere!" wrote René Dumesnil. "It is less certain that he was always understood. His playing was often accused of dryness and inexpressivity. Against this, one should weigh... the clarity and fluidity of his jeu perlé... and [his] perfect knowledge of classical traditions."⁴⁵

During his long career Diémer premiered many works of contemporaries, including Franck's Variations symphoniques and Saint-Saëns' Rhapsodie d'Auvergne. He was instrumental in reviving interest in the music of the early keyboard masters (Daquin, Dandrieu, Couperin, Rameau, Scarlatti) through his historic harpsichord concerts at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1889.⁴⁶ He was appointed Marmontel's successor in 1888. Over the next three decades his class turned out a long list of distinguished performers and teachers.⁴⁷

Louis Fleury has left a colorful pen portrait of professors Diémer and de Bériot and of their pupils as seen through the eyes of a Conservatoire student of ca. 1895:

Furtive, reserved,...walking quickly and brushing the walls, a thin little man with the air of a retired scout master made a quick entry beneath the porch, rushed up the left stairway and exited two hours later, vanishing like a shadow in the direction of the boulevards. It was M. [Charles] de Bériot, professor of one of the two classes of piano hommes, another member of the illustrious family of Garcia, Viardot and tutti quanti.⁴⁸ He lived alone and a little morose amid his objets d'art in the then deserted regions of the boulevard Berthier, near the fortifications. He was said to be a teacher of some merit; Viñes,⁴⁹ poor Malats,⁵⁰ Morpain and Decreus are the proof. But he couldn't approach in prestige his colleague Diémer, whose stature was immense, rivalled only perhaps by that of Massenet.

Diémer's arrival was always an event of sorts. His coupé let him off on the rue du Conservatoire. Always a bit late, he came through the door at the end of the court while his ten [sic] students, pacing back and forth beneath the windows of the secretary's office, waited to catch a glimpse of him. He seemed slight, already bent over, his handsome musketeer's head flattened under an enormous top hat, his neck carefully wrapped in a white silk scarf....

With an engaging smile [Diémer] greeted his young disciples, who showered him with attentions, one taking charge of his briefcase, another making off with his umbrella, the rest fighting over the right to relieve him

of his hat and precious overcoat upstairs. I beg readers not to see any intentional irony in this little description. I later came to know Diémer quite well, and I liked and admired him very much. He was an exquisite human being and a great virtuoso. But without these little details any portrait of him would be incomplete.

I can see as though it were yesterday this group of youths who are now important personalities. Small and slender,... Cortot, full of projects, already immensely active, dreamed of composing, of conducting; left for Bayreuth as a coach and came back an impresario of Wagnerian productions; marked everything he touched with the stamp of a personality of the first magnitude; and after this amazing circuit (parabole) found himself several years later a pianist once again, a vocation he had quite a flair for.

.....
At fourteen, Lazare-Lévy⁵¹ had already reached his present height. Blond and curly like a little processional Saint John, incredibly nearsighted, he hoisted himself up on the soft pedal during the concours, devouring with hungry eyes the manuscript to be sightread, while [Armand] Ferté,⁵² built like a giant, went his way with the youthful serenity of a man who knew he had it made.

The sallow complexion and cavernous eyes of Edger... contrasted sharply with the baby-doll, peaches-and-cream complexion of de Lausnay.⁵³ Likewise, the meridional fire of Garés was the antithesis of the refined dandyism of the Lille-born Grovlez.⁵⁴ As for Robert Lortat,⁵⁵ he was known back then as Lortat-Jacob, like his father. One day, returning from London, I called his attention to the fact that he was billed on the posters of the Philharmonic under the horrible appellation of Herr Jacob Lortat. That day he tore his birth certificate in two and relegated the offending half to the bottom drawer.

All these young men played the piano quite well. They would have been shocked and delighted if one had predicted that some day they would rival their maître. Diémer was at that time at the zenith of his fame. His concept of piano playing has sparked considerable debate. He was not, in truth, literary-minded; nor was he a [tone] painter, philosopher, orchestral thinker or even an organist. He held the piano to be what it is: an instrument with hammers on which one can perform Bach, Beethoven or Chopin, but not Kant, Corot or Mallarmé. He was born a pianist--he had prodigious natural abilities--and he died a pianist, a famous exponent of an honest school of playing which made it a point of honor to play what was written, without gimmicks or fakery. If his

close friends can be believed, he did not practice a lot, maybe an hour a day devoted to exercises; but he drew on a solid foundation.

It is perhaps at the harpsichord, where his brilliant technique has never been surpassed, and in the works of Saint-Saëns that he was at his best. This somewhat dry style of music suited him well in that it did not overstrain his emotionally reserved temperament (*une sensibilité qui s'extériorisait peu*).⁵⁶

Diémer was a virtuoso in the old Hummel-Moscheles-Thalberg tradition, with an unaffected delivery and exceptional pianistic finish but also a rather brittle tone and a restricted dynamic range. Foreign concert-goers accustomed to the freer, more passionate playing of Liszt's and Leschetitzky's disciples often found his performances lacking in breadth and color. The French, on the other hand, readily forgave Diémer his cool, slightly academic approach. To them he was no mere mechanicus but a refined stylist and a musician of high integrity and taste.⁵⁷

Diémer's playing was much discussed by contemporaries; their reports converge sufficiently to give quite a clear picture of his performance art. Of his teaching, however, very little can be stated with certainty. Testimonies are scant--suspiciously so, for a maître who had so many illustrious disciples--and woefully short on specifics.⁵⁸

It would be logical to suppose that a practicing concert artist like Diémer would have relied extensively on demonstration at the keyboard in his lessons. Yet oddly, not one student mentions this. The general impression one gleans is that his instruction was pedantic and strongly indebted to

received ideas. He is portrayed as a sophisticated and urbane personality, well-connected socially and devoted to furthering the careers of his pupils. Louis Aubert described him as "exacting and meticulous" and stressed that he "never permitted faking for the sake of the effect."⁵⁹

Diémer did not have to harangue or bully his students to exact discipline and hard work from them. His celebrity, combined with the fierce peer competition that reigned in his class, sufficed to ensure that there were few who did not try their utmost to excel and win his approval. "In our eyes," Cortot observed,

[Diémer] personified the successful virtuoso type. He fully merited his reputation... by virtue of his rare qualities of musical integrity alone. In reality, his chief claim to fame was his stunning performance technique, the perfection and transparency of which were equalled only by Planté.

Although * [disconcerted] at times by our interpretive liberties, which he held in check only with a response I might describe as good-natured astonishment, [Diémer] instilled in us the habit of realizing the notated score honestly and correctly at the keyboard, a virtue he exemplified in the highest degree.

Later he was only too happy to be able to use his influence to help launch his pupils on a performance career after they graduated - and I speak as one who benefited especially from his solicitude - by arranging for them to establish contact with his whole entourage of friends from the Faubourg Saint-Germain, at concerts given in his lovely private hotel on the rue Blanche.⁶⁰ If * [favorably] disposed, these people could make one famous overnight. In short, he was a great pianist and the nicest person imaginable.⁶¹

Cortot's discreet silence on the subject of Diémer's pedagogical abilities says a lot. His friend and old classmate

from the preparatory division, Joseph Morpain, was less circumspect. Writing to Clara Haskil in 1959, Morpain observed:

...Until the end of time you will be [Cortot's] student. It's official, and there's nothing more to say. Cortot himself is still considered the student of Diémer, who had a magnificent class but never gave a single piece of advice, not one suggestion, about anything at all [my emphasis].

It is by his own efforts mainly that Cortot got where he is (c'est à lui-même... qu'il doit le principal),... and secondly it's thanks to his sister Léa and especially to the advice of our comrade Edouard Risler. He told me so himself....⁶²

It would be easy to discount Morpain's remarks as biased if his were the only damning testimony. After all he was a student of de Bériot, not of Diémer, and the rivalry between the two classes was fierce and long-standing. His judgment, however, is corroborated by the Italian composer-pianist Alfredo Casella, perhaps the only illustrious student of Diémer who wrote about his maître's teaching in any detail. While Casella's experience may not have been entirely typical, his expert knowledge of pedagogy and performance problems makes his opinion worth quoting:

By 1894, when I was hardly eleven, I had already memorized the forty-eight preludes and fugues of the Well-Tempered Clavier. I knew several other pieces of Bach, a dozen Beethoven Sonatas, the Mozart D minor Concerto [No. 20], six Chopin études, compositions of Martucci and Sgambati and much chamber music, also memorized....

In January, 1896, my mother decided to go to Paris,... [to] determine personally what possibilities that capital offered for the completion of my training.... Vincenzo Sigheicelli... thought at once of presenting me to Louis Diémer, whose reputation as a teacher was broad and undisputed.... We went to see Diémer at his home. He was a little man, somewhat humpbacked,⁶³... with an

enormous white mane in the style of Liszt.... He was very polite to us, and sat me at the piano at once. He praised me highly and told my mother that he wanted me in his class in October. He guaranteed that I should finish the course with the greatest of success. The favorable impression I had made on him was consolidated two days later, when he had me play at the Conservatory in the presence of his class. Cortot was still a student at that time, and graduated the following July with a memorable performance of the fourth Chopin Ballade. Diémer saw on this occasion that I possessed serious possibilities which could do him honor as a teacher.

.....
I was to take the entrance examination at the beginning of November. Diémer, contrary to my mother's opinion, had found the Chopin Sonata [in b minor] unsuitable for the purpose. He said it was "too dry." It was necessary to improvise another program, which consisted of the final presto of the Mendelssohn Fantasy in F# minor, the Bach Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue, and the Toccata of Sgambati. The examination took place on November 2, 1896, before a jury presided over by Théodore Dubois,... a perfect example of the bureaucratic and "respectable" type of musician.... The performance of my three pieces went well, and I noted evident signs of pleasure in the attitude of the illustrious jurymen. I was ready to leave when Dubois said to me: "You're not through, boy; you must read at sight that manuscript on the piano." I was disconcerted for a moment, not having known about this part of the examination, and answered: "I'm really not used to reading at sight." ... Dubois responded in his clerk's voice: "And I'm not used to hearing such things said." All of them burst out laughing. I read the piece, and, miraculously, did well....

The next day I went for a lesson.... The old Conservatory was a large and horrible edifice with a courtyard which was murderously drafty. The rooms were small and inferior even to those in our most dilapidated music schools. The lesson was scheduled for 2:00 p.m., but Diémer was invariably thirty to forty minutes late. I learned from him to be punctual with my conservatory students, remembering those interminable waits in winter in that lugubrious courtyard, where it was impossible to protect my hands from the cold.

.....
Diémer was an easily influenced man, very sensitive to adulation. The pupils who were the best bootlickers got along best with him, and I did not belong to this group. The extreme cordiality which he had shown me in our first meetings changed little by little to a certain coolness. He took pleasure in telling me before the class that I was "lazy like all Italians." In addition to this, he

was a very mediocre teacher. This is strange, as his fame was great. For many years the most brilliant new French pianists, including Cortot, and many foreign ones had come from his class. When a piece did not go well, he never knew how to explain the cause, but told the student only to study it again and to practice many exercises, especially scales. From three years in his class, I do not remember ever having heard from him one of those observations which solve a problem for the pupil and disclose a new horizon to him. His technical instruction was thus negative. He was no more interesting in matters of interpretation, where his remarks were colorless and banal [my emphasis]. His tastes were reactionary: he infinitely preferred Gounod to Wagner.

.....
Nevertheless, the students worked intensively in that class. The Paris Conservatory, like other schools, contains a few distinguished teachers and many mediocre ones. The high level reached by its students is attributable much less to the ability of the teachers than to the fact that hundreds of candidates compete every autumn for the few available places, and to the exceptional spirit of emulation which exists among the students themselves within these classes.

.....
We must not forget the part taken in the education of the student by the Paris environment. There are seven orchestras and a daily average of five to eight concerts by the greatest artists of the world. It can easily be understood that under such favorable conditions the students find themselves constrained to produce the greatest possible results, even if the teacher is not of the first order.

Here is a personal example. When I entered the class, I had studied only six Chopin études. Diémer required me to bring in one a week, memorized. As a result, in five months I had learned the two books complete at the age of thirteen. Even today [i.e., in 1941], with the enormous progress attained in late years in our piano study, nine-tenths of the forty pupils who come each year to my advanced course at Santa Cecilia have studied only the limited number of these études required by the official curriculum, although these études are one of the foundations of piano playing. This demonstrates once again the uselessness and even the damaging nature of set programs of study, and, in contrast, the superiority of teaching which is varied from time to time according to the ability and the possibilities of the student. Certainly such teaching requires greater effort than the bureaucratic type, but it results in much greater

development of the student's technique... [and] enables him to attain a much better musical culture....

Among my classmates of those years [i.e., 1896-99], real fame was attained only by Lazare-Lévy and Gabriel Grovlez. However, there were excellent pupils, some of them quite hard working. I also had to work quite a bit in order not to be outdistanced by those whose gifts I felt to be manifestly inferior [to my own]....⁶⁴

Even if Morpain and Casella are right in saying that Diémer's verbal instruction in lessons was unmemorable, one should not conclude from this that pupils gained nothing from the experience of studying with him. "Few are the responsive pupils who do not identify at some point with glamorous teachers,"⁶⁵ Abraham Chasins remarked perceptively. No doubt many of Diémer's charges strove with all their might to emulate this famous "king of the scale and the trill."⁶⁶ In doing so, they internalized the traditional French school ideals plus two that were Diémer's own: high artistic scruples and respect for the written text.

Diémer's style, which hewed to the "precepts of the patriarch Antoine Marmontel--the goût distingué, aristocratic taste, and netteté irréprochable, irreproachable precision,"⁶⁷ appears to have left its imprint on the playing of Robert Casadesus, Lazare-Lévy, Marcel Ciampi and even Casella.⁶⁸ Diémer also influenced Risler to some extent, notably in Risler's concern for precision and sobriety of expression, though not in his sound ideals. He had a rather negligible impact on Cortot, Yves Nat and Robert Lortat. "Surprisingly," wrote Gavoty, "a performance aesthetic as clear-cut as [Diémer's] was not incompatible with an eclectic teaching; this

artist, so dry and precise himself, had passionate disciples whose fervor he did not stifle. He tempered them without breaking their spirits...."⁶⁹ While Diémer must have tolerated deviating conceptions of music, the fact that pupils of the calibre of Cortot or Nat absorbed so little of his style was due less to any intentional eclecticism on Diémer's part than to his attitude of "benign neglect" which allowed the most original personalities to develop unhindered along their own paths.

The Conservatoire archives once again furnish the most detailed record of Cortot's studies in Diémer's class:

Report of Louis Diémer (Piano supérieur)

- Exam. 18 January 1893 (15 years 3 months, 1st year [in the advanced class]) (Schumann: Novelette in D major). Excellent little student, hard-working and intelligent; a very good reader.
- Exam. 15 June 1893 (Beethoven: Sonata Op. 57, Finale). Very intelligent student, a worker; has progressed enormously this year.
- Exam. 17 January 1894 (competed [unsuccessfully] in 1893) (Chopin: Allegro de concert). Very intelligent, studious pupil and meticulously prepared playing mechanism (mécanisme très soigné). Excellent reader.
- Exam. 14 June 1894 [1^{er} Accessit, 2 July 1894] (G. Mathias: Allegro symphonique). Remarkable pupil, for whom I have nothing but praise. Has made striking progress. Perfect reader.
- Exam. 23 January 1895 (Mozart: Overture to The Magic Flute, transcribed by Diémer). Remarkable pupil: very studious, very good musician, quite outstanding pianistic qualities.
- Exam. 13 June 1895 (Chopin: 3rd Ballade). Excellent student, very musical temperament and a remarkable playing mechanism.

Exam. 22 January 1896 (competed [unsuccessfully] in 1895)
Beethoven: Sonata Op. 111). Quite remarkable and
excellent student. Perfect reader. Very studious.

Exam. 17 June 1896 [1^{er} Prix, July 23, 1896] (Liszt: Légende
de Saint-François de Paule marchant sur les flots, and
Bach-Liszt: Fugue in G minor for organ). Perfect
student, very studious, very intelligent and remarkably
musical.

Notes of Ambroise Thomas on the piano examinations

Exam. 15 June 1893 Piece: adequate (passable) Sightreading: AB

Concours public 22 July 1893 [no award] (Chopin: Fantaisie in
f minor)

Exam. 14 June 1894 Piece: AB Sightreading: AB

Concours public 22 July 1894 [1^{er} Accessit] (Saint-Saëns:
Thème varié in C major) Piece: AB Refined and warm
playing

Exam. 23 January 1895 Piece: not bad, good [musical] feeling

Exam 13. June 1895 Piece: AB Sightreading: AB

Concours public 22 July 1895 [no award] (Rubinstein: Concerto
No. 4 in d minor) Piece: Touch is much too harsh, too
dry. Exaggerated dynamics.

Notes of Théodore Dubois on the piano examinations⁷⁰

Exam. 17 June 1896 Piece: B Beautiful sound, too much pedal
Sightreading: B

Concours public 23 July 1896 Premier Prix (Chopin: 4th
Ballade) Piece: TB Very colorful, authoritative;
mature; remarkable artist. Sightreading: B

Cortot's first years in Diémer's class were, in his
words, "marred by the predictable, salutary failures that had
dogged me in the preparatory class."⁷¹ In 1893, his
performance of the last movement of Beethoven's "Appassionata"
in the June examinations was good enough to qualify him to

compete in the public concours. The required piece that year was a work with which his name would one day be closely associated: the Chopin Fantaisie in f minor. Cortot did not win any honors, though the following letter from Diémer to Risler reveals that Cortot came frustratingly close to receiving the lowest award:

23 July 1893

My Dear friend,

I attended the Piano Competition which was held yesterday, to answer your letters and give you the results. The first of your letters... interested me very much; your plan to perform the last 5 sonatas of Beethoven in Paris this winter pleases me enormously. You'll have to go through with it....

We were very fortunate at the concours yesterday. We shared the Premier Prix with the de Bériot class as follows:

Malats - de Bériot
Wurmser - de Bériot
Niederhofheim - Diémer

Then Aubert received a 2^e Prix, Jaudoin the 1^{er} accessit - the only one awarded, and much applauded, he was remarkable in the competition. Finally, Laparra got a 2^e accessit. You see, we have no right to complain, especially since we were up against a bunch of laureats from last year in de Bériot's class, and had nothing to match them except a single 1^{er} accessit. I have only one sincere regret, and that is that poor little Cortot didn't win a 2^e accessit also; he very much deserved it and he played and sightread very well yesterday. I don't get it at all, apparently he garnered 4 votes, it seems to me that they could just as well have given him one more. Well, it's his first year and if he works well I'm sure he'll be successful next year....⁷²

The following year Cortot did fare better, earning a respectable premier accessit for his performance of Saint-Saëns' Thème varié, Op. 97, a newly composed work that may have

been written expressly for the 1894 piano competition. This success must have encouraged him to work hard over the summer vacation. In the fall of 1894 Diémer noted in a letter to Risler: "Cortot played remarkably for his term opener the Carnaval de Pesth of Liszt and the Sonata in f# minor of Schumann...."73

Around this time Diémer's attitude towards Cortot seems to have taken on added respect, and he began to give him special responsibilities. He had Cortot appointed accompanist for the Conservatoire wind classes (an unremunerated job, as Cortot recalled, but providing good experience). Diémer also started relying on Cortot to help some of the younger and less advanced members of the class.⁷⁴ One of those to whom Cortot gave many extra coachings was Lazare-Lévy, admitted to Diémer's class at the age of twelve after placing first among all piano candidates in the entrance exams of 1894. According to Blanche Bascourret de Guéraldi, these tutoring sessions often took place right during the group lessons: "In the middle of class, Diémer would suddenly say: 'Go next door, Cortot, and work with le petit Lazare,' and the two of them would go into an adjoining room where Cortot would practice with little Lazare and advise him how to approach his pieces."75

In retrospect, Cortot felt that he had learned a great deal from his early teaching ventures. He often told his own students that "the time to start teaching is when you are still studying."⁷⁶ Cortot had already made his debut as a private

"professor" some time before he began assisting Diémer. "I was obliged, by the financial woes common to all large families of reduced means, to learn very young how to teach," he recalled.

I naturally gave my pseudo-lessons in the homes [of my pupils]. I came to know all the ruses of the hackney cab drivers (whose services were absolutely beyond my means) for getting around the capital using clever shortcuts. I have to admit that although my students were nothing special and my own ideas about the art of teaching were still very problematic, I took considerable pride in my work. [I had] the feeling that I was learning more about how to correct my own pianistic shortcomings than I would have gained from long hours of practicing by myself, deprived of the critical input essential to my progress.

Thanks to the intelligent initiative of my maître Louis Diémer,... I had the opportunity to take charge (of preparing) some of my first-year classmates for their lessons when I was about seventeen years old.

...Their talents, which augured well for fame in the future, would even at that stage have sufficed to make the reputation of a seasoned professor.

To be truthful, our nearly identical ages and the like enthusiasm with which we pursued our careers frequently transformed our joint search for a better fingering or a more judicious nuance into impassioned debates concerning the relative merits of our professional idols of the moment, of a Paderewski or a von Bülow, a Richard Strauss or a Mahler. Nonetheless I gained, be it obscurely, an idea of the effectiveness of a certain strategy which consisted in developing in my young and talented disciples a sense of their own personality and of what I might term the intelligent use of their faults. A sort of instinctive * principle led me to make them discover for themselves the technical or imaginative shortcomings in their interpretations, and the means of correcting them by conjecturing the initial intention of the composer.⁷⁷

In June 1895 Cortot passed the qualifying examination admitting him to the final concours, rating an "assez bien" ("rather good") from Ambroise Thomas for his performance of the Chopin Ballade No. 3 in A^b major, and a "bien" ("good") for his sightreading. The required work that year was Anton Rubinstein's Concerto No. 4 in d minor, hardly a typical

Conservatoire competition piece.⁷⁸ Presumably the High Council (Conseil Supérieur) wished by this choice to pay tribute to the memory of the great Russian pianist, who had died November 28, 1894. Cortot, who from Diémer's enthusiastic reports might have been expected to triumph, went home empty-handed.⁷⁹ The whole competition was a disaster for Diémer's class: the jury awarded three first prizes, all to de Bériot pupils (Fernand Lemaire, Morpain and Marcel Chadeigne), and three second prizes (to Camille Decreus and Ferdinand Motte-Lacroix, both de Bériot pupils, and to young Lazare-Lévy).

Cortot's struggle for academic recognition: some possible explanations

Looking at the names just mentioned, a thought comes to mind: some of these pianists made respectable, even distinguished careers as performers and teachers. Not one came anywhere close to the level of interpretive artistry and international acclaim that Cortot achieved. Why were these lesser lights able to carry off Conservatoire awards with comparative ease, while Cortot barely managed to keep his head above water? Three reasons can be advanced, the first having to do with Cortot's temperament and physical aptitudes, the second with Diémer's teaching and the third proposing that Cortot's difficulties might indicate a clash between incompatible value systems, i.e., that they can be read as a

sign that he was already a bit indifferent to some of the traditional performance ideals upheld by the Conservatoire's juries.

Given Cortot's repeated assertions that in youth he had "bad" hands that "often betrayed my intentions,"⁸⁰ and given the fact that even in maturity he required long hours of practice to stay in top technical form,⁸¹ it is tempting to postulate that from the strictly physical standpoint he did not have exceptional natural aptitude for piano playing. Cortot, it is often asserted, was not in youth nor later a phenomenal virtuoso. He was notoriously inconsistent in performance, and he tended to slide around and drop a good many notes even in his best years. He was, according to this line of reasoning, a great, original interpretive artist who happened to make the piano his medium of expression. His unusually long apprenticeship at the Conservatoire⁸² and later multiplicity of musical activities are cited as further proof that he was "not cut out [by nature] to be a concert pianist."⁸³

The argument is not without merit, but it requires qualification. First, the fact that Cortot achieved his highest level of virtuosity quite late (around 1922-24, i.e., in his mid-forties)⁸⁴ and began to decline relatively early (ca. 1938-39) from that peak does indeed point to acquired physical skills rather than superb natural facilities. Second, two notions are invariably bandied about concerning Cortot's technique: 1) that his shortcomings, such as they were, were

due to weak or clumsy fingers; and 2) that he was too busy with other musical pursuits to keep his hands in shape. While the latter statement may be true with respect to the middle and late phases of his career, it hardly accounts for Cortot's problems during his student years. If he had trouble making the grade at the Conservatoire, it was not for lack of application. André Benoist (1880?-1953), who was his classmate from 1890-92 in both the solfège and piano courses and who later made a fine career in the United States as an accompanist, wrote that Cortot was "indefatigable. He would have lengthened the day to twenty-eight hours of practice if he could [have]."85

That leaves the explanation advanced by many of Cortot's students and fostered by Cortot's own remarks: that his problem was "weak fingers,"86 which is at best an unfortunate choice of words and at worst a misconception. At no time since his earliest years in Decombes' class, if then, did Cortot lack for sheer finger strength.⁸⁷ Diémer's reports shed no light on the real nature of the difficulty, but there is one important clue in Decombes' evaluations of 1889, which allude to the heaviness of Cortot's playing. This could mean undue weight on the keys, inefficient coordination of hand-finger-arm action, or sluggish reflexes; the first interpretation is unlikely, given Cortot's age and French school training. It is probable that the real crux of the problem was reflex speed and movement coordination, which directly affect agility and velocity.

Cortot may have had to work harder to make up for adaptive instincts that were a little less keen than those of some of his classmates.

Indirect support for this hypothesis can be found in his recordings, which reveal that a great many of his inaccuracies come in passages that tax the pianist's agility, especially rapid jumps and extended-position figurations with hand displacement. Interestingly, Cortot's son Jean told this writer that Cortot compiled the exercises in his Principes rationnels de la technique pianistique mainly for his own use and only secondarily for the use of the professors at the Ecole Normale de Musique.⁸⁸ Even if one suspects the contrary, it is significant that in the first two chapters, devoted to finger technique, Cortot's emphasis is not primarily on promoting strength of independent fingers (as it most certainly is, for instance, in Philipp's tenuto exercises on diminished seventh chords),⁸⁹ but rather on fostering agility, fluency and control of evenness. Large portions of his later chapters on extensions (IV) and wrist technique (V) are also concerned with developing agility and pin-point reflexes.

Several additional conditions particular to Cortot's situation may have contributed to his slow advancement at the Conservatoire. From his description of his early studies with his sisters one may presume that he had no thorough, rigorous technical training until he arrived in Paris at age nine. This surely placed him at a disadvantage vis à vis many of his

schoolmates, the more so if he was not blessed with superlative instincts. Add to this his abundance of temperament and high-strung, impressionable disposition, and he would appear to have been a classic candidate for insecurities (of technique, of memory) in performance, as well as for the debilitating sort of stage fright.⁹⁰ Cortot's disciple Reine Gianoli⁹¹ was convinced that many of Cortot's mishaps in concert that critics ascribed to inadequate "fingers" were actually due to psychological factors and nerves: "I always had the impression that Cortot's difficulties were not deficiencies of technique...--he had an extraordinary technique and was capable of flawless playing--...but were instead failings of the nervous system. He was at times seized by panic."⁹²

Finally, one wonders if the adolescent Cortot played in his examinations with the same rash enthusiasm, the same willingness to risk technical slips in order to capture the musical substance, that characterizes many of his recorded interpretations. If so, he may have jeopardized his chances for academic success by performances that would have struck the staid Conservatoire jurors as uncontrolled, rough or disdainful of established codes and conventions. In later years at least, Cortot was never one to compromise his interpretive aims for the sake of conforming to supposed "authoritative" traditions, much less in order to achieve a note-perfect but lifeless rendering. His conceptions were formulated with exceptional sensitivity to the instrument's sonorous possibilities but with

little regard for the pianist's security or ease of execution. Cortot undoubtedly worked hard in practice to develop the "virtuosic" side of his playing and to polish the material details of a performance. In the heat of the actual performance, however, he became totally absorbed in projecting his experience of the music, even if that entailed taxing his means to the limit or throwing caution to the wind.⁹³

Turning now to Diémer, the question arises: to what extent was this prestigious virtuoso-teacher able to help Cortot in his struggles to master the instrument? While it is impossible to answer with certainty, there are grounds for suspecting that although his instruction may not have precipitated new problems, it was not very effective in resolving pre-existing ones. With his superlative natural instincts, Diémer could afford to dispense with conscious inquiry into the workings of the playing apparatus and the piano. Yet the prodigy's assets can be the professor's liabilities: Diémer had no urgent personal reason to question the old notions and practices by which he had learned, nor any first-hand experience of the problems facing pupils who had to "sweat blood" to develop a serviceable technique.

Moreover, Diémer's methods appear to have been highly formalistic. Casella implies that he did not attempt to discover the specific causes of an individual's shortcomings. Regardless of what ailed his pupils, his prescription was the same: large doses of scales and technical drill. If a

performance was inadequate, the fault must lie with the visible small playing levers, the fingers. The remedy: hours a day of pattern exercises to strengthen, individualize and equalize the offending digits. "A young pianist," writes Louis Kentner, "had to possess really outstanding talent to survive [this type of teaching], artistically speaking, and find his own way through trial and error.... If he did so survive, he at least had at his disposal the strong athletic fingers.... To such a case applies the saying 'What does not kill me makes me stronger.' But these survivors, few in number, do not really prove the excellence of the method as such, only the strength of their own talent."⁹⁴

Cortot's talent was vigorous enough to weather the scholastic training he received from Diémer. Whether he emerged from the experience unscathed is another question. Certain aspects of technique were, and would remain, his weak point. He never quite reached the stage where he could invoke the full range of his physical means at will, nor count on retaining full control where exceptional power and velocity were called for simultaneously. There is no knowing whether he would have been a better pianist had he received a more rational instruction--the kind that affords insight into the conditions under which the physical apparatus functions with maximum efficiency and reliability. It is likely that he would have played his best more often and longer. Almost certainly

he would have become a different type of pedagogue: one less willing to dissociate work on "interpretation" from work on the "mechanism."

Cortot never intimated that Diémer was to blame for his pianistic difficulties, nor did he criticize Diémer's shortcomings as a teacher in writing. Nonetheless, he arrived at a personal technique and teaching focus (content) that were the antithesis of Diémer's. Like Busoni, Cortot rejected any mechanistic conception of technique and any method that relied extensively on repetitious, automatic drill that dulls the mind and spirit.⁹⁵ For Cortot, the master teacher's foremost responsibility was not to supervise the pupil's finger training (that could be done by any competent assistant teacher) but to develop the mind and artistic sensibility that direct the fingers. The young pianist had to be made to understand that in the technical domain no less than in the musical, the key to rapid progress was practicing with concentration, imagination and a clear grasp of what he/she was after and how to go about realizing it. "It is not the substance [of exercises] per se, but the way they are practiced that makes them valuable,"⁹⁶ Cortot emphasized. Though he took pains to fill his study editions with advice and exercises for overcoming technical difficulties, in his classroom teaching Cortot focussed much more on questions of interpretation and musicianship than on technique. He was harshly critical of teaching that is content to give the obvious, trite suggestions ("play faster," "more

evenly," "use the fingering marked," "don't forget the crescendo") without bothering to make the expressive and artistic rationale clear to the pupil.⁹⁷

Pedagogy, like performance, evolves new values and priorities with each successive era. In considering Diémer's handling of Cortot, one must stop short of ascribing Diémer's "non-interventionist" stance to a simple lack of vigilance or know-how. It may well have been to some extent a strategy of calculated restraint intended to foster creative initiative and self-reliance in his talented young disciples. Lazare-Lévy may have been reiterating Diémer's philosophy when he argued that too much intellectualizing and physiological analysis can be harmful to the very gifted:

With geniuses of the piano,... who at ten or twelve show such gifts that they seem to have been born to play the instrument, [one] has only to let them blossom, to guide them without getting bogged down in the tyrannical application of principles, however excellent. To make such persons conscious of that which is purely instinctive is risky.... To point out too clearly the obstacles, the dangers, is often to replace assurance with fear.... Make them learn in the shortest possible time an ever greater number of pieces, that's the best course of action.⁹⁸

Cortot distanced himself from Diémer's influence well before completing his Conservatoire studies. In his last two years in the class (1894-96) he looked more and more to Edouard Risler for artistic guidance and moral support. "Risler was my brother and my idol," Cortot supposedly told Gavoty. "I owe him everything. He was very fond of me; I admired him unreservedly... [and] thought only of imitating him - to the

point that when we played behind a screen we were sometimes mistaken for one another, so closely had I modeled my playing on his."⁹⁹ The specifics of Risler's style and influence on Cortot will be considered in the following chapter. All that need be said here is that Risler's studies in Germany had converted him to a quasi-romantic view of the piano that exploited the instrument's full range of dynamic and coloristic possibilities. Cortot, captivated by this grand "orchestral" manner, tried valiantly to attain the same power and tonal effects as Risler.

Cortot may also have been emboldened to venture off the beaten path of French pianism by an oft-recounted meeting with Anton Rubinstein, for whom he supposedly played around 1894:

...This is the really important thing to be learned from the example of a Liszt [or] an Anton Rubinstein:... they managed to imbue the pieces... [they played] with the vitality... of their involved personalities, with their own imaginative responses - and ensured in this way that the music still spoke personally [to later ages] and preserved its intense expressive power....

On this subject, I have twice received precious lessons which I took to heart and tried to apply ever after. The first dates back to the time when I was still Diémer's student. Anton Rubinstein - it was the period of his last Paris concerts - asked to hear one of (Diémer's) students, and he chose me. At the time I was working on Beethoven's "Appassionata" Sonata, the only piece in my scholastic repertoire with which I dared to risk myself.

Arriving at Diémer's, I found the piano already open and Rubinstein ensconced in a big armchair, holding a half-empty cognac glass in one hand and an enormous glowing cigar in the other.

Without any introductions, Diémer gestured to me to sit down at the instrument; feet trembling on the pedals, I began to execute the immortal work. Execution, alas, in the deadliest sense of that word, because when I had finished and was waiting for a word of encouragement or

criticism..., I heard a gravelly voice say "Your cognac is excellent, Diémer, I'll have another with pleasure!"

I crumbled inside, envisioning myself abandoning my career then and there. Diémer gestured to me that I could go. But as I passed in front of the armchair... to take my leave..., [Rubinstein] stood up, and putting his hand on my shoulder, said: "That's nice, petit. But you know, one does not simply play the sonatas of Beethoven: one must reinvent them."¹⁰⁰

Risler and Rubinstein provided Cortot with performance goals far loftier than virtuoso fingerwork and pianistic polish, but neither could have explained to him the exact ways and means of achieving those goals. Cortot had to figure those out for himself, by experimentation, and it is likely that he did not happen onto the technical procedures best suited to his physical equipment overnight. The Rubinstein Concerto No. 4, the morceau de concours in 1895, would seem to call for exactly those qualities which Cortot coveted for his own art but which most French pianists of the day willingly renounced: a big, lush sound, poetic abandon and warm emotional projection.¹⁰¹ Indeed, it is not inconceivable that in his youthful impulsiveness, Cortot charged straight for the artistic goals with whatever technical means he could muster up. In that case the criticisms of Ambroise Thomas--"Hits much too hard,... exaggerated nuances"-- should perhaps be read as the indignant reaction of a self-respecting guardian of tradition to an innovative but as yet pianistically raw style of playing. Whether the elderly jury members realized it consciously or not, they had good reason to regard Cortot's approach as an distinct--and from their point of view, undesirable--aberration

from the French norm. Within a few years at most, his playing was going to break with many a cherished technical precept and performance ideal.

In October of 1895 Cortot, at eighteen the oldest student in Diémer's class, began his fourth and final year in the advanced division. He passed the January examinations with Beethoven's Sonata Op. 111, which Risler was presenting that very year in public recital. On June 17, 1896, he performed Liszt's Légende de Saint-François de Paule marchant sur les flots and Bach's Fugue in g minor for organ (arr. Liszt) at the spring examinations and was easily admitted to the final concours. "Bien" noted the new Conservatoire director, Dubois, in his register: Beautiful sonority, too much pedal."

The required piece for 1896 was Chopin's Ballade No. 4, Op. 52 in f minor, a work that later became a cornerstone of Cortot's concert repertoire. The outcome of the competition was jubilantly reported by Diémer to Risler, who was coaching at Bayreuth:

July 24, 1896 St. Martin du Tertre par
Luzarches Seine et Oise

My Dear Friend,

Our dear winner yesterday, Alfred Cortot, took it upon himself to send you a telegram as soon as the concours was over, but I thought I'd tell you too this morning how fortunate we were yesterday and what a triumph it was for the Diémer class.

1^o 1^{er} Prix. (by unanimous vote) Cortot alone (seul)
2^o 2^e Prix. Lazare-Lévy alone

then three premiers accessits for Estyle, Gallon and Grovlez who shared [this award] with Lhérie, a student of de Bériot, and a 2^e accessit for Roussel, split with de Bériot's student Bernard.

Cortot was absolutely remarkable, and so far above all the others that it was impossible to give more than one first prize. The two second prize winners of de Bériot from last year were left at the starting gate. I'm really happy about Cortot's success, he deserves it in every way and he has such a good and loyal character, too. He has tremendous affection and admiration for you.

.....
I was pleased and touched to receive your kind telegram yesterday. Tell me what you've been up to soon, and in the meantime know, dear Edouard, of my real and sincere affection,

L. Diémer¹⁰²

The Conservatoire final competitions were major musical events in that day. Cortot's performance and sole first prize¹⁰³ were reported in thirty-five newspapers. Alfred Bruneau of Le Figaro characterized Cortot as "a remarkable artistic temperament" and the only contestant who, "having begun Chopin's Fourth Ballade with the necessary abandon, imagination and grace, finished it in a tumultuous fire of passagework, in an astounding roar of accumulated sonorities. And to top matters off, he sightread with superb authority the pièce de lecture by M. [Charles] Widor."¹⁰⁴

Emile Pessard, critic of l'Evènement and a professor at the Conservatoire, did not even wait for the official results to be announced. "If this chap doesn't win a first prize in a few minutes I'll be mighty surprised," he wrote.

He sings ravishingly, has a superb left hand, and with a masterly final run he conquers the hall, the jury, the public and the applause. M. le Directeur has to ring many times to restore silence, but in his joy at seeing

such an artist I suspect that he's ringing rather half-heartedly in order to allow the bravos to continue a little longer. M. Cortot sightreads like an angel and runs away like a rabbit!¹⁰⁵

"For once the judgment of the jury was approved by the public," noted Fernand Le Borne in the Monde Artiste. "The reason why is that this competition... revealed an outstanding virtuoso talent."

M. Cortot, so remarkable two years ago..., is one of the most beautiful and complete pianistic temperaments that I have had occasion to hear in a long time.

This young man has it all, even the most apparently antithetical qualities: grace as well as vigor, charm as well as power, calm as well as warmth, solidity as well as fire, fantasy as well as a strong sense of rhythm, impeccable virtuosity as well as the deepest feeling.... In short, he's a natural (c'est une nature) in the most elevated sense of this word, and he interpreted Chopin's... Ballade like a master, not a competitor.¹⁰⁶

As was the custom of the era, Cortot received a grand piano with his prize, in addition to the laurel and the useful publicity. (The Erard and Pleyel firms each offered an instrument; he chose the Pleyel.)¹⁰⁷ "I remember that I sent a telegram to my ailing mother in the provinces," Cortot recalled, "which read: '1st Prize unanimously. Happy. Going to be able to work well.'"¹⁰⁸

Chapter III: Notes

¹"Souvenirs d'un flûtiste: Le Conservatoire vers l'époque de son centenaire (1895-1900). Les Pianistes," Monde Musical, 36, No. 3-4 (Feb. 28, 1925), p. 44.

²Cortot/Entretiens, "La Révélation de la musique." Decombes could well have had professional and social contacts with Chopin. His teacher Zimmerman (1785-1853) lived at 7 square d'Orléans, practically next door to the composer.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Quoted in Gavoty, Les grands interprètes: Alfred Cortot (Geneva: Ed. R. Kister, 1953), p. 7.

⁶Quoted in A.C., p. 27.

⁷Morpain completed his piano study with Charles de Bériot, winning a 1^o prix in 1895; he stayed on to study harmony, counterpoint and fugue before turning to piano teaching full time. A highly respected pedagogue, Morpain was the author of a didactic text, Comment il faut jouer du piano (Paris: Heugel, 1922), and an early champion of Brahms in France. He was professor of preparatory piano at the Conservatoire from 1920-1941 and served as Directeur Général of the Ecole Normale de Musique from 1943-1953.

⁸Quoted in Jacques Feschotte, Joseph Morpain (Paris: L'Association Amicale de l'Ecole Normale de Musique de Paris, [1961?]), n. pag.

⁹Quoted in A.C., p. 34.

¹⁰In Reynaldo Hahn (Paris: Buchet/Chastel, [1976]), pp. 40-41, Gavoty reports that Hahn (1874-1947), who studied with Decombes around 1888-90, had less esteem for Decombes at that time than for his other two professors, Massenet and Grandjany, but he objected indignantly "when others condemned [Decombes] as 'spineless, false, a bad teacher.'" In a letter of 1890, Hahn drew this picture of a class piano lesson: "Mothers, students, stools, friends of mothers, friends of students, relatives of one, protégés of another - all were piled in upon each other as in a pot of molasses. And it swarmed!"

¹¹"Souvenirs d'un flûtiste...: Les Pianistes," p. 44.

¹²"Emile Decombes," Monde Musical, 20, No. 11 (June 19, 1912), p. 194.

¹³In those years and for long after, it was forbidden by Conservatoire policy to play in public for remuneration while still enrolled in one's instrumental class, a rule often broken by students in reduced circumstances.

¹⁴Cortot/Entretiens, "La Révélation de la musique."

¹⁵Reprinted in A.C., pp. 33-34. At least one future celebrity on this program--Ravel--studied with Anthiôme from 1889-91.

¹⁶Laparra (1876-1943), like Reynaldo Hahn, would soon drop his piano studies in favor of composition. A student of Massenet, he achieved considerable popular success in the light opera field, notably with La Habañera.

¹⁷Haas (188?-19 ?) later taught piano, sight-reading and chamber music in Paris and was for a time on the faculty of the Ecole Normale de Musique.

¹⁸Wurmser (187?-19 ?) studied with de Bériot, winning his 1^o prix in 1893. He went on to earn a certain repute as a virtuoso in the classic mold, a conductor and a teacher. He founded his own school and was also from 1907 professor of an advanced piano class at the Conservatoire Musica-Femina, a private school for socially privileged girls. In 1937 he was named director of the Ecole de Musique of Nevers (France).

¹⁹Decreus (1876-1939) studied with de Bériot (2^e prix, 1895). After unsuccessful efforts to make a solo career he turned to accompanying and teaching, concertizing with Ysaye, Touttet and Emma Calvé among others. He spent 1912-1924 in the U.S., returning to France to help administer the newly founded Conservatoire Américain at Fontainebleau. He was professor of piano and alderman at that school from 1924-39 and taught piano privately in Paris.

²⁰'tours d'adresse': literally, acrobatic feats; here, bravura passagework that showed off the pianist's virtuosity and dazzled the listener, "tricks of the trade."

²¹"L'étude d'un répertoire scolaire comportant les oeuvres de Hummel, de Field, de Moscheles et d'autres compositeurs-pianistes du début du XIX^e siècle m'y apprenait, ainsi qu'à mes camarades, les particularités de ce style du bel-canto, qui bien que * [word missing] aux superficiels agréments - de l'arpège, du trille, de la gamme brillante et d'autres artifices désuets de même ordre - que l'on denommait alors les 'tours d'adresse' - n'en conservait pas moins les principes

fondamentaux d'une sensible déclamation lyrique, dont Decombes au reste nous prodiguait les exemples, avec un toucher d'une grace et d'une élégance ravissantes....

Il évoquait fréquemment pour nous le souvenir de son [Chopin's] exécution incomparable, en faisant ressortir le surprenant équilibre rythmique (tout à fait opposé à cette fallacieuse conception du rubato effeminé dont une 'sensiblerie' exagérée - je refuse d'instinct ici l'emploi du mot 'sensibilité - croit de nos jours détenir le secret) et qui accordait à la main gauche - selon les propres termes du maître polonais - le rôle de maître de chapelle, conservant constamment la cadence essentielle, sans toutefois s'opposer à la liberté d'interprétation vocale de la ligne mélodique confiée à la main droite...." ("La Révélation de la musique").

²²Whether a pupil won an award or not depended on the number of votes cast for him by the jury. In the preparatory division 3^e médaille was the lowest distinction above failure; 'dernier nommé' indicates that Cortot garnered the least number of "pass" votes of anyone receiving that award.

²³A.C., p. 38. Then as now, Conservatoire rules stipulated that after the initial year, a pupil could spend no more than two consecutive years in a class without obtaining an award.

²⁴Archives Nationales, Série AJ³⁷ 232-236, 245, 252, 290-295. Cortot's grades are reprinted in A.C., pp. 36, 38-39 (preparatory level); and 42, 49-51 (advanced level).

²⁵Decombes clearly did not share Cortot's low opinion of his own hands.

²⁶First year students were not obliged to compete for awards but could do so on the recommendation of their professor.

²⁷As Director of the Conservatoire, Thomas (1811-1896) had to preside over all examination and concours juries.

²⁸AB = Assez Bien (rather good).; B = Bien (good); TB = Très Bien (very good).

²⁹Entretiens, "La Révélation de la musique."

³⁰As quoted in Feschotte, Joseph Morpain, n. pag.

³¹For details of Risler's life and artistic accomplishments, see Karen Taylor, "A Bridge Across the Rhine: In Memoriam, Edouard Risler (1873-1929)," Journal of the American Liszt Society 8 (Dec. 1980), pp. 25-43.

³²Conservatoire regulations forbade professors to charge fees for private lessons to class members. A few, Delaborde for

one, gave extra lessons gratis. Most arranged for pupils to work with a répétiteur, who was paid by the student. The role of the répétiteur, Magda Tagliaferro explained (interview with the author, December, 1977) "was difficult and thankless: it was to prepare the pupil, to check for wrong notes and rhythms, to fix posture and hand position, to drill études and exercises, and to 'repeat' (hence the name) what the maître said."

³³A fervent Wagnerian, Risler often played piano transcriptions of the operas in private auditions attended by Paris musicians and amateur enthusiasts. From 1896 he was for several years a member of the coaching staff at the Bayreuth Festivals.

³⁴Letters in the Risler family archives document study trips, generally of two or three months' duration, in 1890, 1892, 1893, and 1897. Since not all of the correspondence from 1893-1897 has survived, there may have been others as well.

³⁵Cortot must have worked hard at this skill, for Diémer often took the trouble to mention his fine reading ability in his bi-annual reports. Reynaldo Hahn, who drilled Diémer's pupils on sightreading, seems also to have been impressed. In a letter to Risler he wrote: "Yesterday I went to work with Diémer's students on their reading, and I must admit the little sparrow [Cortot] wasn't bad at all." Teasing Risler about his devoted admirers, he added: "Mlle. Cortot and Alfred asked me to convey all their warmest thoughts. I was even obliged under duress to give them your address, so be ready for anything" (unpublished letter from the Risler archives, n.d., marked by a later hand 'mai/début juin 1893').

³⁶The last digit is illegible; 1890 is the only relevant year in which the 22nd fell on a Tuesday. This would make Cortot not quite thirteen at the time. Assuming a slight misdating, the year may have been 1895 (Cortot performed St. François de Paule at Bayreuth in 1896). The handwriting is juvenile, however, and quite different from that of an autograph letter of 1896.

³⁷This rumor was unfounded, but Risler did tour the U.S. in the 1890's, to no great success. The experience was so distasteful that he refused to return, though later he made highly acclaimed tours of South America and Canada.

³⁸Unpublished letter in the Risler family archives; for a photocopy of the original French text see Appendix I, p. 565.

³⁹It is not clear whether Léa means that the drawing to determine the order of performance of competitors had taken place or that the order had been rigged.

⁴⁰Unpublished letter, Risler family archives; a photocopy of the original text is given in Appendix I, pp. 563-64.

⁴¹Diémer did not care greatly for the rigors of the touring virtuoso life. He married wealth and stayed in Paris most of the time, playing for free in public concerts and salons. He adored performing--so much so, Louis Aubert reported, that he "got seriously ill one time when he tried to give up his concert career." See Aubert, "Quelques souvenirs," in L. Rohozinski, ed., Cinquante ans de musique française (Paris: Librairie de France, 1925), p. 382.

⁴²Bertrand, Le Monde de la musique, p. 220.

⁴³Writing to Risler (unpublished correspondence in the Risler family archives, n. d. [ca. 1892], courtesy Antoinette Risler), Hahn compared Diémer and Planté thus: "Of all the established virtuosi I've heard, the one who most delighted me... was Planté. He has a thousand ways of playing a chord piano. Perhaps his playing lacks virility - but must one always aim to be forceful? Delicacy and grace are sometimes as great as energy and power.... Planté... is a fine sculptor. Not a chiseler like Diémer: his passage work is never mechanically clear; he gives it something blurry, something languid which rounds off the sharp corners."

⁴⁴Cf. Albert Payne, Berühmte Klavierspieler (Leipzig: Payne, 1893), p. 79; and Mark Hambourg as cited in Harold Schonberg, The Great Pianists (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), p. 269.

⁴⁵R. Dumesnil, in Cinquante ans de musique française, p. 193.

⁴⁶This was the same "world fair" which acquainted the French with modern Russian music and at which Debussy discovered Javanese gamelan music. Diémer, co-founder of the Société des Instruments Anciens, played Couperin and Rameau to great success on a replica of a Taskin harpsichord.

⁴⁷In addition to persons already mentioned, the following also studied with Diémer: Victor Staub (1872-19 ?), Eugène Wagner (1878-19 ?), Alfredo Casella (1883-1947), Robert Lortat (1885-1938), Jean Verd (1886-19 ?), Marcel Dupré (1886-1971), E. Robert Schmitz (1889-1949), Yves Nat (1890-1956), Marcel Ciampi (1891-197), Robert Casadesus (1899-1972), and Gaby Lhôte-Casadesus (1903-).

⁴⁸The Garcia-Viardot family was very powerful in official French music and theatre circles. Pauline Viardot (1821-1910) was the daughter of the Spanish singer/pedagogue Manuel Garcia, and the younger sister of La Malibran. A gifted pianist as

well as an opera singer, she studied with both Liszt and Chopin. Charles de Bériot (son of the violinist of the same name and La Malibran) was her nephew. Alphonse Duvernoy was her son-in-law.

⁴⁹Ricardo Viñes (1875-1953), Spanish-born pianist residing in Paris, became a great champion of modern music (Debussy, Ravel, Satie, Schmitt, Turina, Falla, Poulenc, Mompou, etc.) and was the favorite interpreter of the composers of the Société Musicale Indépendante (S.M.I.) for many years.

⁵⁰Joaquin Malats (1872-1912) was an esteemed concert pianist. He gave the première of Albeniz' Iberia and was one of the first Spanish artists to make recordings. His career was cut short by an early death.

⁵¹Lazare-Lévy studied with Diémer (1^o Prix in 1898), and with Lavignac (harmony) and Gédalge (fugue). A concert pianist and a teacher of some repute, he often replaced Diémer, Staub and later Cortot during their absences. In 1920 he took over Cortot's class during his three-year leave, and after being appointed his successor in 1923, taught advanced piano from 1923-1940 and 1944-53 at the Conservatoire.

⁵²Ferté (188?-19?) won his first prize in 1898. Rumor had it that he was the illegitimate son of playwright Victorien Sardou; at any rate he was well connected. A mediocre pianist by most accounts, he was one of Diémer's favorite assistants. Ferté became professor of a preparatory class at the Conservatoire in 1927 and was promoted to an advanced class in 1941-44.

⁵³Georges de Lausnay (188?-19?) studied with Diémer (1st prize, 1899) and was professor of piano at the Conservatoire from the 1930's until 1952.

⁵⁴Gabriel Grovlez (1879-1944) won his first prize in 1899 (Diémer's class). He taught piano and was assistant to Philippe Gaubert and later director of the Opéra. Though his theater works are forgotten, his several sets of piano pieces for children are still heard occasionally.

⁵⁵Lortat (1885-1938) won first prize in 1901 (Diémer's class) and in 1904 was awarded the coveted Diémer Prize. A highly admired pianist and lecturer, he excelled in Chopin and was among the first to perform Fauré's complete piano works. Lortat concertized throughout Europe and made a number of recordings. He took over Cortot's class in 1918-19.

⁵⁶Fleury, "Souvenirs d'un flûtiste...: Les Pianistes," pp. 45-46.

⁵⁷Adolphe Boschot, in Chez les musiciens (Paris: Plon-Nourrit [ca. 1922-26]), p. 239 wrote that "one could not listen to [Diémer] at the piano or the harpsichord without admiring the sobriety of his style. A performance by Diémer was a persuasive lesson in good taste: no searching for dubious effects, no concern to shine in his own right to the detriment of the music, but on the contrary a... constant desire to render it faithfully. Diémer effaced himself and let only the musical work itself show. His playing reflected it as purely as a smooth and limpid stream. The outlines of the landscape stood out clearly in every detail, taking on a more brilliant, more transparent harmony in which the depth of shadows seemed attenuated under a gleaming finish."

⁵⁸The scarcity of testimonies, even of the anecdotal sort, suggests that Diémer's teaching was on the whole unmemorable. Lazare-Lévy wrote in his obituary of Edouard Risler that in later years most of Diémer's former students turned their backs on him once he was no longer of use to them in advancing their careers.

⁵⁹Aubert, "Quelques souvenirs," p. 247.

⁶⁰The concerts, known as Les Matinées de la rue Blanche, featured renowned artists like Sarasate and Diémer himself, as well as young talents such as Jacques Thibaud, Jules Boucherit and Risler in varied programs of solo, chamber and vocal repertoire. They were attended by music dignitaries including Saint-Saëns and Fauré and by patrons and music lovers from high society.

⁶¹"[Diémer] représentait à nos yeux le type accompli du pianiste virtuose. Sa renommée... se voyait pleinement justifiée par de rares qualités de probité musicale, mais trouvait surtout sa raison d'être dans le fait d'une exécution technique d'une impeccabilité et d'une transparence surprenantes dont on ne trouvait l'équivalent que chez Francis Planté. Bien que parfois * à une de nos audaces interprétatives, auxquelles il n'apportait qu'un contrôle que je qualifierai de bienveillamment étonné, il nous habitua à cette honnêteté matérielle de la traduction pianistique dont il était l'éminent dépositaire. Et il n'était que trop heureux, par la suite, de pouvoir favoriser les débuts de ses élèves dans la carrière de concertiste qui les attendait au sortir de sa classe - et je suis un témoin particulièrement qualifié de cette affectueuse disposition - en leur ménageant dans son bel hôtel de la rue Blanche le contact avec tout l'entourage de ses familiers du Faubourg Saint-Germain, lesquels étaient susceptibles de devenir dans un milieu * * efficaces d'une renommée immédiate. En somme, un grand pianiste et le meilleur homme du monde" (Cortot/Entretiens, "La Révélation de la musique").

⁶²As quoted in Jérôme Spycket, Clara Haskil (Lausanne: Editions Payot, 1975), p. 247. Haskil was complaining to Morpain that a journalist had laid great stress on her study with Cortot, whereas she felt she owed more to Morpain.

⁶³Cf. Bertrand, p. 220: "[Diémer] had a deplorable posture at the piano." He did not pass this on to his better students, however; both Cortot and Risler sat upright and quite still at the keyboard.

⁶⁴Casella, Music in My Time, pp. 16, 24-27, 30-31, 33, 38-42, 48-49. Casella was for some years professor of the advanced piano class at the Liceo di Santa Cecilia (Rome). His contribution to the literature on the piano, Il pianoforte (Milano-Roma: "Melos" collection, 1937) gets good marks from Kaemper (op. cit., p. 198), who writes that Casella "makes up for a certain lack of conceptual originality with his clarity and impartiality." Casella may be overly harsh on Diémer and on the Conservatoire for snubbing him: the archives show that at a certain moment he wanted badly to be considered for a piano post and was even willing to be naturalized French to gain it, but he was passed over.

⁶⁵Chasins, Speaking of Pianists, 2nd ed. (New York: A. Knopf, 1967), p. 80.

⁶⁶According to Paul Loyonnet, this is how Diémer was known in Paris at the turn of the century. See Timbrell, "An Interview with Paul Loyonnet," p. 117.

⁶⁷Piero Rattalino, Da Clementi a Pollini (Florence: Ricordi, 1984), p. 194.

⁶⁸Cf. René Dumesnil, "L'Enseignement," in Cinquante ans de musique..., II., pp. 190 ff; Monde Musical, Nov. 30, 1899, p. 436 (A. Mangeot on the style of Victor Staub), April 30, 1908, p. 131 (C.M., review of Lazare-Lévy) and May 12, 1912 (Mangeot, assessment of Prix Diémer candidates); A. C., p. 240 (general); Joseph Methuen-Campbell, Chopin Playing (New York: Taplinger, 1981), pp. 90-91 (on Lortat, Léon Kartun, Casadesus); Rattalino, Da Clementi..., pp. 194-96, 340, 344-46 (on Casadesus, Casella). Casella owed something to Diémer only in his virtuoso, finger-oriented technique. His ideas on music were much more progressive, and like Cortot, he was more of an intellectual than Diémer.

⁶⁹A.C., p. 41.

⁷⁰On the death of Ambroise Thomas (February 12, 1896), Dubois, until then a professor of composition, assumed the directorship of the Conservatoire.

⁷¹Entretiens, "La Révélation de la musique."

⁷²Unpublished letter from Louis Diémer to Edouard Risler (abridged); Risler family archives.

⁷³Unpublished letter of Diémer to Risler, marked "St. Martin du Tertre par Luzarches, October 6, 1894"; Risler family archives.

⁷⁴Gavoty cites as students tutored by Cortot during his studies with Diémer (A.C., pp. 42-43): Carlos Salzedo (later a famous harpist and champion of modern music in New York); Eugène Wagner; Gabriel Grovlez; Albert Estyle (later professor of piano accompaniment) and Jean Gallon (later professor of harmony), both on the Conservatoire faculty; Lazare-Lévy; Alfredo Casella; and Raymond Roussel. Gavoty's account must be amended on several points. He implies that all but Salzedo were taught free, whereas letters to Eugène Wagner (B. N., Dép. Mus., lettres autographes, Cortot), who worked with Cortot from 1895-97, indicate that Cortot charged Wagner 5 Francs per lesson. Moreover, most students were not in Decombes' class, as Gavoty states, but were younger pupils of Diémer. Roussel was tutored mainly by Risler (cf. letters from Diémer in the Risler family archives). Casella, who did do a great deal of coaching with Cortot, did not begin working with him until the fall of 1896, i.e., after Cortot's graduation.

⁷⁵Interview with the author, May, 1978. "Cortot and Lazare-Lévy could not have been more different in their views on music and piano playing," Mme. Bascourret observed, "but Lazare-Lévy had an amazing ear, and many decades after those early coaching lessons he could sit down at my piano and give an uncanny imitation of Cortot's style of playing."

⁷⁶Reine Gianoli, as told to this writer.

⁷⁷"J'ai été de très bonne heure... convié par des nécessités d'ordre matériel communes à toutes les familles nombreuses, et dont les ressources sont limitées, à l'apprentissage du professorat.

J'allais naturellement donner mes pseudo-leçons à domicile et j'ai très bien connu toutes les ruses employées par les cochers de ces fiacres de l'époque (et dont il n'était pas question que je puisse faire usage), pour se rendre d'un point de la capitale à un autre en utilisant de subtils raccourcis. Je dois reconnaître que malgré l'insignifiance de mes élèves et mes notions encore fort problématiques de l'art d'enseigner, j'y trouvais une assez grande fierté, et le sentiment que j'y apprenais moi-même davantage pour corriger mes propres défauts

pianistiques que n'y eussent suffi de longues heures d'études personnelles dépourvues de la critique indispensable à mes progrès.

Mais c'est à l'intelligente initiative de mon maître Louis Diémer... que j'eus environ la 17^{ème} année à m'occuper de plusieurs de mes camarades de première année dont les talents, promis à une juste notoriété ultérieure, eussent déjà pu suffire à la réputation d'un professeur chevronné....

Je dois à la vérité de dire que nos âges presque identiques et l'enthousiasme semblable avec lequel nous abordions la carrière transformaient bien fréquemment nos recherches communes d'un meilleur doigté ou d'une nuance plus judicieuse en discussions exaltées concernant les mérites respectifs de nos héros professionnels du moment, d'un Paderewski ou d'un Bülow, d'un Richard Strauss ou d'un Mahler. J'y puisais cependant obscurément la notion de l'efficacité d'un certain comportement doctrinal qui consistait à développer chez mes jeunes et talentueux disciples occasionnels, le sentiment de leur propre personnalité et de ce que je pourrais dénommer l'utilisation intelligente de leurs défauts. Une sorte de principe * instinctif m'engageait à leur faire découvrir par eux-mêmes les lacunes techniques ou imaginatives de leurs interprétations et les moyens d'y remédier en supposant l'intention initiale du compositeur"(Cortot/Entretiens, "Le Professorat").

⁷⁸In the years 1885-96, works by Chopin were chosen six times. Others providing concours pieces were: Saint-Saëns (2) Weber (1), Beethoven (1) and Guiraud (1). Only once had a concerto--and that by Saint-Saëns--been designated.

⁷⁹Pupils were not eligible for the same or a lower award than they had previously received. The jury had the option of awarding Cortot a first or second prize, or no prize at all.

⁸⁰A.C., p. 43.

⁸¹This was confirmed by Gavoty, Magda Tagliaferro, Yvonne Lefébure and others close to Cortot.

⁸²Probably no other important French pianist took the maximum allotted time, ten years, to successfully complete the Conservatoire's piano course. Planté won his first prize at 11, Diémer at 13, Pugno at 14 (in four years), Risler at 15 (in five years).

⁸³Rattalino, Da Clementi..., p. 115. See also Fermoy, "Cortot," p. 267.

⁸⁴Laurent Ceillier noted in "Les Chefs d'oeuvre du piano au XIX^e siècle" (review of Cortot's ten anthological concerts), Monde Musical, 35, No. 9-10 (May 31, 1924), p. 184, that Cortot

had recently acquired a lot more virtuosity, and that his technique had grown in "breadth, simplicity,... freedom of movement, ease and suppleness."

⁸⁵Benoist, The Accompanist... and Friends, ed. John Maltese (Neptune City, N.J.: Paganiniana Publications, 1978), p. 26. The passage continues as follows: "We just could not keep up the pace of his work, nor did any of us care to. Is it any wonder that Cortot, in the end, graduated ahead of everyone? And this, in spite of the fact that he was not endowed with the talent of the least of us."

⁸⁶A.C., p. 27.

⁸⁷Note Decombes' allusions in his report of 1890 (see p. 68) to Cortot's "good fingers" and "strength", and in that of 1891 to his "very solid mechanism" and "very beautiful fingers."

⁸⁸Jean Cortot, interview with the author, November, 1977. Magda Tagliaferro and Louis Goupy also affirmed that Cortot invented some of the exercises for his own use.

⁸⁹See Isidor Philipp, Exercises for the Independence of the Fingers (New York: Schirmer, 1917).

⁹⁰Either inadequate technical training or severe bouts of performance anxiety can produce symptoms--awkwardness, tension, heaviness--almost indistinguishable from those of organic locomotor weakness, except that the former are to a considerable extent remediable by patient, intelligent work on basics. In Cortot's case it seems unnecessary to hypothesize anything less than average to good coordination when his problems could easily have been due to a combination of other factors.

⁹¹Reine Gianoli (1917?-1978) was one of the first big talents to desert the Conservatoire for the Ecole Normale. She often performed in the 1930s in Cortot's interpretation courses and also had private lessons with him then and in the 'forties. After an active concert and recording career she turned to teaching, first at the Ecole Normale and later at the Conservatoire.

⁹²From the typescript of the uncut sound track of Alfred Cortot, dir. Lévy (documentary for French television, ORTF Antenne 2, 1977).

⁹³Cortot did insist in his master classes and pedagogical writings on the need for a comprehensive command of the keyboard. He was the first to criticize the wrong notes,

smudges and memory lapses that sometimes marred his performances (cf. A.C., pp. 147, 217).

⁹⁴Louis Kentner, Piano (New York: Schirmer, 1976), p. 53.

⁹⁵"Technique," noted Busoni, "...does not lie merely in fingers and wrists or in strength and endurance. Technique in the truer sense has its seat in the brain, and is composed of geometry - an estimation of distance - and wise coordination" (The Essence of Music and Other Papers, tr. Rosamond Ley [New York: Philosophical Library, 1957], p. 4).

⁹⁶Principes rationnels..., p. 4.

⁹⁷See Cortot, "De l'enseignement du piano au Conservatoire," pp. 211-212; and Thieffry, ed., Alfred Cortot: Cours d'interprétation (henceforth abbreviated as Cours d'interprétation in references), pp. 15-16.

⁹⁸Lazare-Lévy, introductory remarks to a master class by Swiss composer-pianist E. R. Blanchet, reprinted in Monde Musical, 47, No. 5 (May 31, 1936), pp. 158-59. This would appear to have been Isidor Philipp's philosophy as well.

⁹⁹A.C., pp. 57-58. The statement is not from the Radio Lausanne interviews, as Gavoty's italics imply, but Cortot may well have made similar remarks in another context. He made no secret of his debt to Risler.

¹⁰⁰Benedictions and words of wisdom from the giants of the past are of course the stuff of which bio-mythographies are made. There is some question in my mind whether this session with Rubinstein really took place or whether it may not belong to the realm of legend or to Risler's biography. In the final analysis, it does not matter much whether it was apocryphal or real. Cortot related it so often, that it obviously expressed a conviction central to his interpretive philosophy. This particular account is the one he gave in Entretiens, "La Révélation."

¹⁰¹On Rubinstein's style of playing see Gerig, op. cit., pp. 290-97.

¹⁰²Excerpt from an unpublished letter in the Risler family archives; the original French text is given in Appendix I, pp. 566-67.

¹⁰³It was unusual for the jury to award only one first prize. Cortot in later years came to think that he was the only one in Conservatoire annals so honored, but this was not so: it happened half a dozen times between 1830-1875 and three other

times after 1890: 1892 (Joseph Thibaud, brother of Jacques), 1910 (E. Robert Schmitz) and 1918 (Audoli).

¹⁰⁴As quoted in A.C., p. 52.

¹⁰⁵Quoted in Entretiens, "La Révélation."

¹⁰⁶Le Borne, [account of piano competition], Monde Artiste, July 26, 1896, p. 471.

¹⁰⁷See A.C., p. 52.

¹⁰⁸Entretiens, "La Révélation."

Chapter IV

Forging a Style: Influences and Initiatives (1896-1910)

When Cortot graduated from the Conservatoire in 1896, the great "musical renaissance" that would raise France to a position of international leadership in the first part of the twentieth century was in full swing. The creative sector was caught up in a cultural crisis not unlike the ones that had gripped French art and literature a decade earlier.¹ Music was produced and consumed by the public at a hectic pace as rival factions--conservative and progressive, "Gallic" and "Germanic"--struggled to impose their works and views, and individuals tried to find their own voice in the maelstrom of stylistic currents.²

The performance domain was beginning to show new vigor as well, though from the stylistic standpoint things were less chaotic. To an outside observer, "école française" still conjured up the notion of a solid pianistic tradition with its own idiomatic performance ideals and technique. Making allowances for differences of personality and temperament, nearly all French pianists were seen as identifying with it. Turbulence was just below the surface, however. Within a few years this façade of classicist discipline and conformity would begin to crack.

For Cortot and others of his generation it was an exhilarating time in which to come of age, but also an era of deep professional uncertainty and cultural self-appraisal. They felt increasingly alienated from the performance outlook of the older Parisian virtuosi and salon idols who had made their careers in a society enamored of surface dazzle and theatrics. Moreover, while they were at least as nationalistic in their musical outlook as their elders, not all were as convinced of the superiority of the French school in pianistic matters. They listened with keen interest, as French artists always had, to the current crop of "international circuit" virtuosi that came through Paris, but they were more receptive than earlier generations had been to the influence of these "foreign" models. Signs of a new artistic sensibility can be discerned here and there in the group of French pianists who were just coming to prominence in the 'nineties.³

Since French musicians of that time were not particularly adept at articulating their aesthetic views, the reaction of younger pianists against the attitudes and practices of the old guard looks on the surface like a typical "generation gap" clash. There was much unhappiness with established institutions and prescribed routes to success. A few of the best young artists were full of doubts concerning the validity of their objectives and achievements.⁴ Rarely, however, does one find any explicit recognition that the whole French piano tradition was facing a crisis. A crisis was brewing,

nonetheless. In the last half of the nineteenth century France had produced few world-class pianists--nothing comparable to the brilliant constellation of Liszt and Leschetizky students ruling the stage. The incommensurability of the French classicist values and technique with the Romantic expressive and sonorous demands rendered performance of much of the century's finest literature, from late Beethoven to Schumann and Liszt, problematic for French pianists--at least from the perspective of international critical opinion. The French school seemed to have reached the end of its inner development and declined into mannerism. The next decades would show otherwise, but for the moment it desperately needed an infusion of fresh aesthetic and instrumental ideas. Edouard Risler, and to a lesser extent, Raoul Pugno appear to have been the catalysts in its rejuvenation. Each artist in his own way provided new directions and incentives to Cortot and others of his time.

Pugno.

Raoul Pugno (1852-1914) was an extraordinary talent, and the most important French pupil of George Mathias. Though only nine years Diémer's junior, he was virtually unknown as a concert pianist until a "second debut" in 1893 made him a celebrity in Paris musical circles overnight.⁵ Once Planté had retired from active concertizing, Pugno was Diémer's only close rival in pianistic gifts, and he was a stronger interpretive personality than Diémer. Pugno possessed a very polished

technique and amazing natural agility. His playing was fluent, limpid and delicately nuanced. He could spin out passagework with a gossamer lightness, or project with considerable power if the context demanded it.

Pugno's style was more an extension of the traditional French manner than a departure from it, but there were several novel aspects to his artistry that make him a figure of particular historical interest. He was the prototype of a new breed of French pianist: the "non-virtuoso" musician-pianist who enjoyed great popular success. Pugno had virtuosic means, but he did not pursue virtuosity as an end in itself. Nor did he confound clarity of execution with clarity of musical expression, as some of his contemporaries seemed to.⁶

Pugno had a warm, outgoing temperament and a more overtly "communicative" manner than many French pianists. He was concerned with projection of character and mood, and cultivated a flexible, finely nuanced delivery that could capture the music's subtler expressive details. Pugno never allowed discipline to weigh heavily on his style. His interpretations always retained a streak of impetuosity and spontaneity (some called it nonchalance) that added greatly to their charm. In these respects he anticipated the shift of performance mentality reflected in Cortot and others of the next generations who spurned calculated bravura in favor of enlivening re-creation of the music.

Pugno represented a turn, or more exactly a return, to a more lyrical, cantabile style of playing than was practiced by the Saint-Saëns/Marmontel/Diémer clan. One notes in his performances an altogether greater concern with tone quality and with the sensuous and coloristic possibilities of the piano sound. Critics waxed ecstatic over his "toucher napolitain" (Gavoty),⁷ which would seem to have drawn on a naturally silky tone,⁸ an elastic singing legato touch that may have owed something to Chopin's piano aesthetic (absorbed via Mathias) and a sophisticated use of the pedals. Cortot admired Pugno's full, richly shaded sound and warmth of feeling, noting that Pugno's playing of the second theme from the Grieg Concerto was "matchless. His sonority was so beautiful, in its spontaneity of expression, that he gave the impression of a different instrument entering!"⁹

Cortot probably never had piano lessons with Pugno, but he did have some personal contact with the older artist. In 1895 he audited Pugno's harmony class and Xavier Leroux's composition class at the Conservatoire.¹⁰ He did not pursue either subject as a regular student the next year (perhaps those projects had to be shelved as a result of his disappointing show in the 1895 concours). In the fall of 1896 Pugno exchanged his harmony class for an advanced women's piano class. The two crossed paths again, however, soon after Cortot's graduation. Both pianists were affiliated with the Maison Pleyel. They performed together on a number of

occasions, notably to publicize Gustave Lyon's new "double piano" (one frame and sounding board, two actions and keyboards) in 1898.¹¹ Pugno's playing was in all probability one of the models to which Cortot looked during his formative years. It demonstrated that French charm and elegance, two of Cortot's most appealing qualities,¹² were quite compatible with a performance art of substance and with a full tone and dynamic range.¹³ Pugno almost certainly sparked Cortot's interest in the coloristic effects obtainable through various refined pedal techniques.¹⁴

Risler.

Only two or three years after Pugno's triumphal return to the stage, a second great musician-pianist, Edouard Risler, began winning public recognition. Pugno's playing reflected a shift of values that was broad in scope but not very marked in any area. In Risler's playing the change was radical in certain aspects of performance (interpretive attitude, rejection of virtuoso display, increase in volume and variety of sound), while other elements (the cantabile manner, the poetic and imaginative domain) were not pursued far. Risler was the antithesis of most of the popular French virtuosos that preceded him. Nothing in his style or deportment was calculated to charm or ingratiate himself with the public. He kept surface pianistic values thoroughly subordinate to the presentation of the musical content.¹⁵ There were no theatrics, no sentimental effusions, no artifice or personal

vagaries. On the contrary, his playing had a directness and vigor, a stylistic purity and musical depth that was almost unprecedented in the French school.

When the recorded performances of Pugno and Risler are studied side by side,¹⁶ the differences of aesthetic and sound ideals are immediately evident. Pugno's melodic lines are fluid and supple, finely etched in the details of figuration and amply nuanced, suggesting that he subscribed to a bel canto keyboard idiom. His textures are transparent and often light and airy. Risler, by his own admission, aligned himself with Liszt's view of the piano as a "surrogate orchestra." In his playing the "melic" element, i.e., the feeling for soaring, lyrical declamation, is less pronounced and the rubato more moderate and not as whimsical as Pugno's. Risler's tone is fuller and much more robust. His textures are as clear as Pugno's, but weightier. His readings, moreover, are more straightforward and concise in expression. Rather than playing with nuance and color in the minutiae of phrase turns, Risler tends to focus on long line and vertical relations, exploiting the rhythmic and harmonic tensions between parts through rhythmic accentuation and varied articulations.

Temperamentally, Pugno was the more vivacious and extroverted artist, and his playing had the sparkle, wit and poise of a man who enjoyed life and was at peace with himself. There are traces of the sophisticated, "hedonistic trait"¹⁷ found in French composers of the era in Pugno's style, notably

in his fondness for fast tempi, his easy appropriation of superficial romantic gestures and his conscious delight in his rippling fingers. Risler was the more sober and pensive interpreter, and the more complex personality. There was an intensity in his music-making, a tautness and drive that had nothing to do with either pianistic or "self-expressive" impulses, but arose rather from an inner fervor, a profound sense of the gravity and urgency of the interpreter's mission, and a Faustian striving to get to the very core of the music.

Risler became a role model for the whole galaxy of French pianists who were just coming to artistic maturity in the period 1895-1914, by virtue of his high ideals, his uncompromising musical integrity and the superior quality of his programming.¹⁸ "Wittingly or unwittingly, we all more or less came under his strong influence," wrote Cortot. "He inspired us to look beyond the notes and higher than the keyboard. He showed us that without renouncing our distinctive [national] traits, we could add a touch of seriousness or emotion which we often seemed to lack. Moreover, he gave us the desire--or rather, the courage--to resist the public's appetite for all that gratifies its understanding at little cost."¹⁹

Risler served as Cortot's mentor during the most crucial years of his musical and intellectual development. No doubt Risler sensed in the younger artist a kindred spirit and a choice recruit to his idealistic vision of the interpretive

art. The two became fast friends, and their lives remained closely intertwined both professionally and socially until Cortot's marriage in 1902. If Cortot's memory of Risler's playing was not overly embellished by sentiment and time, he could scarcely have chosen a more worthy model to emulate:

[Risler's] magnificent playing, which drew on an amazing variety of resources and at times seemed to embody the elemental power of a force of nature, united spirit (élan) and reflection, vigor and subtlety. It combined the most direct and communicative emotion with a very singular feeling for instrumental color.

The musical phrase acquired a quality of persuasive conviction in his hands that underscored all the more the conventional elegance of his predecessors, the silversmiths of the keyboard.

At the time [i.e., in the mid-1890s] he played as one paints à la fresque: broadly, with vibrant strokes, enlivening the thoughts of the masters with his admirable sense of design and timbre.

Anyone who did not hear him recreate at the piano one of these operas of Wagner in which he evoked all the dramatic passion with incomparable mastery, has missed experiencing one of the most beautiful orchestras imaginable.

Above all, Risler excelled at making the architecture, the logic of a musical design, understandable. As he played, the work he was interpreting took shape in the mind of the listener in an almost visual way, as though it were accompanied by a commentary.²⁰

Risler was the perfect "instructive" pianist. His style was large-scaled on the conceptual as well as the executive level. His interpretations were carefully meditated and respectful of the meaning of the music and the notated text (in this sense he was clearly a modern pianist),²¹ and there were very few mannerisms or excesses in his playing to imitate. "[Risler] disclosed all the essential principles of interpretation at the piano to me," remarked Cortot, "and [showed me] what a transformation one can effect, in realizing

any work convincingly, through the choice and variety of timbres with which one endows the music. And, I should add, the art of shaping and giving direction to a melodic line and of accentuating the driving rhythms and their evocative characteristics in a meaningful way, which he understood to perfection."²²

In the lives of many great artists there has been someone who has jolted them out of workaday concerns into the exalted realm of spirit, someone who has liberated their creative energies and led them to "a blinding flash of revelation when they see their future destiny clearly marked out before them."²³ Risler's artistry was the spark that triggered Cortot's musical awakening, which was linked in his memory with one particular coaching session:

It was a revelation, I assure you, and it just happened to be precipitated by a magnificent piece of Mendelssohn's, the Variations sérieuses. Risler... called on us at home one day while I was trying to give some shape to that fine work, which Diémer had suggested that I study. He took an interest in my work, which was devoid of meaning if not of mechanical correctness. Seating himself at the piano, he revealed to my imagination the wondrous horizons of a music-making which not only seemed born of the inspiration of the moment, but moreover conveyed by means of orchestral coloring, neither the existence nor the incredibly eloquent resources of which I had ever suspected.

I can say that it was from this moment that I understood what Music required of me, and how I should look upon what was no longer the exercise of a profession, but - however exaggerated and presumptuous this may sound - the fulfillment of a mission that transcended the notion of routine craft. I knew, I saw, I believed, I was enlightened!"²⁴

Through Risler, Cortot absorbed the whole Romantic idealist philosophy embraced by the Liszt-Wagner circle,²⁵ with

its emphasis on music as the expression of the "inexpressible" and vehicle of transcendental values and its conception of the performer as a high priest to the Infinite, charged with humbly serving the will of the music. Differences of personality ensured that in actual performance practice this philosophy gave rise to very dissimilar interpretive styles: Risler's stronger classical instincts and habits inclined him to emotional reserve and self-effacement, whereas Cortot's aggressively individualistic temperament and poetic imagination pulled him much further towards a subjective, outwardly romantic style. Fundamentally, however, the two were motivated by the same aesthetic convictions: the sense of having been summoned to a high calling and the intimation of a vast world behind the written notes of the music.

Because of his close friendship with Risler, Cortot had the opportunity to become very well acquainted with much of the great operatic literature. "Risler delighted in playing the lyric repertoire for hours on end, studying and analyzing it with passion, regaling us with incomparable performances," recalled Reynaldo Hahn.

We passed whole evenings like this,... listening to Edouard play The Ring, the Damnation of Faust, the Roi malgré lui, joining our voices to his truly orchestral playing.... He interpreted these and other scores of all periods and styles with a dramatic instinct, an understanding of the theatre and the vocal art that I have never seen in any other pianist.²⁶

Cortot and Risler often joined forces in concert during the years 1895-98. Whenever Risler played concerti or

piano/orchestra works like the Franck Variations symphoniques in recital, Cortot would serve as "orchestra" (second piano). In March of 1897 the two gave the French première of Liszt's Faust-Symphonie on Gustave Lyon's new double piano. Around the same time they also collaborated in arranging and performing a number of operas in keyboard reductions. These projects provided Cortot with immediate incentives to expand his tonal palette and to experiment with various ways of reproducing orchestra colors on the piano:

Risler and I made two-piano transcriptions of Das Rheingold, of Siegfried, of Crépuscule des Dieux [Götterdämmerung].... In our conscientious search for appropriate timbres, we no longer thought of our pianos as percussion instruments, but rather as substitutes for the full orchestra, whose sonorities we tried to conjure up by repeatedly and tirelessly playing through the scores.²⁷

Franck's Circle.

Cortot and Risler were by no means the only French musicians who rallied to high-minded Romantic musical ideals and to the cause of Wagner's music in the closing decade of the last century. Sharing their outlook were the composers who had gravitated toward the figure and style of César Franck (1822-1890) or aligned themselves with Franck's self-appointed "spiritual heir" Vincent d'Indy (1851-1931), as well as several independent pro-Wagner composers.²⁸ Elliott Zuckermann characterized the emotional and intellectual atmosphere in Franckist circles as one of "humorless idealism and constant talk of Love and Morality."²⁹ Sympathy with Risler's reformist

ambitions would seem to have been less widespread at first in the pianistic community, though he found a staunch ally in his crusade for high programming standards and an anti-exhibitionist attitude in Blanche Selva, a respected pianist who was closely associated with d'Indy and the composers of the Schola Cantorum.

Cortot was introduced to composers in Franck's circle as early as 1892-93, probably through Risler, who was friendly with d'Indy.³⁰ Pierre de Bréville, one of the original "bande à Franck,"³¹ recalled that as a young composer and officer of the Société Nationale de Musique, he was visited by a friend who was anxious for him to meet a schoolboy from Diémer's class. It was Cortot, "still in short pants, barelegged,... [with] a thin face in which two eyes of amazing intensity--the eyes of a grown man--blazed." Giving the youngster d'Indy's newly-published Schumanniana to sightread, Bréville was impressed "not so much by the pianistic ability he already displayed, as by the stamp of a personality in the interpretation which was as precocious as it was undeniable."³²

Cortot's early compositional efforts, initiated under Pugno and Leroux and pursued intermittently over the next decade, were "more influenced by d'Indy's style than by the conformist precepts of the Conservatoire."³³ It is not surprising that Cortot had a high regard for d'Indy: the two shared a passion for Wagner's music and a vital interest in music education, in the broadest sense of that term. They were

both animateurs, dynamic leaders endowed with brilliant organizational talents... and with an intransigent faith in the rightness of their aesthetic views, starting with the conviction "that the artist had an ethical responsibility to always show the most religious respect for his art."³⁴ In the late 'nineties Cortot was on close enough terms with d'Indy to obtain for his young cousin Edgar Varèse the position of librarian at the Schola Cantorum, enabling Varèse to pay for his studies at the school with Roussel, Charles Bordes and d'Indy.³⁵ From 1904-1908 Cortot took over the preparation and conducting of the two yearly symphonic concerts of the Société Nationale de Musique at d'Indy's behest.³⁶

Wagner.

Cortot and Risler were in the thick of the campaign being waged in Paris for Wagner's music in the 1890s and across the turn of the century. Risler had been a fervent champion of Wagner since at least 1889 when, at age sixteen, he made his first visit to Bayreuth. He had no trouble recruiting Cortot to the cause. The two often served as "piano-orchestra" in private hearings of Wagner's operas organized by high society music lovers anxious to familiarize themselves with the complete operas³⁷ or to rekindle thrilling memories of Munich or Bayreuth. Cortot and Risler spent endless hours devouring the music-dramas, enraptured by the power and voluptuousness of Wagner's seductive harmonies. With friends they pored over the libretti, more fascinating than the music to the French

literary Wagnerites: "We studied [Wagner's] characters as if Wotan held the secret of the world and Hans Sachs were the spokesman for a free, natural and spontaneous art,"³⁸ wrote Léon Daudet.

Reminiscing about the intoxicating atmosphere and musical emotions of those years, Cortot said:

The Wagnerian revelation - I'm speaking of the music-dramas... as well as the bold theories on the "art of the future" - gave rise to a sort of religious fervor in all the intellectual milieus which transformed partisans into so many initiates in a mysterious cult. One has only to reread a few pages of the Revue Wagnérienne of those years to realize in what state of mind, in what an ambience of magical and exalted mysticism, we guardians of the secret * [lived].... Literally, we communed in Wagner.

.....
I was quite influenced by all this - so much so that all music, even that furthest from the dramatic impulse personified in Wagner's genius, seemed more comprehensible and closer to me when I tried to grasp its basic spirit in light of the spell [of Wagnerian symbolism] to which I rapturously surrendered myself.

.....
[What I gained from this immersion in Wagner] was an ever-deepening admiration for the music. Also, perhaps, the experience reinforced my instinctive tendency not to dissociate the meaning of the musical message from its initial inspiration. Even now [i.e., in 1953], when I've explored music's horizons at greater length and can appreciate more of its infinite riches than in those days, it takes only a chance encounter with one of Wagner's works to revive those feelings I experienced at the time of my career debut.³⁹

Cortot's Wagnerian adventures are a fascinating chapter in his life, and his biographer Gavoty chronicles them all in lavish and at times fanciful detail.⁴⁰ Several points are worth retaining. First, Cortot was delving into Wagner's music-dramas well before his graduation from the Conservatoire and initial visit to Bayreuth in 1896. A program dated March

30, 1895 announces a complete concert performance of Das Rheingold in the French translation of Alfred Ernst, to be given at the home of M. and Mme. Marcel Gaupillat.⁴¹ The orchestra score, transcribed for two pianos, was played by Cortot and Risler. This may have been the first of the amateur productions of Wagner operas in which they collaborated. There followed Act I of Siegfried in 1897, realized on one of the new double pianos, and Acts I and III of Parsifal in a puppet theatre production directed by Judith Gauthier (daughter of the poet) in 1898.

Second, Wagner was at the center of Cortot's musical universe for some seven years, beginning around 1895-96. One could almost say that Cortot hung his artistic fortunes on Wagner's star--from playing the operas in piano reduction, to making the pilgrimage to Bayreuth and playing Liszt for Cosima Wagner at Wahnfried,⁴² to serving as chorus master (chef de chant) and coach for Charles Lamoureux' Paris Tristan production of 1899, to becoming an assistant coach (musicien assistant) at the Bayreuth Festival productions of 1897 and 1901. Cortot's fascination with the orchestral medium and with Wagner in particular reached the point where he seriously considered switching careers:

...I was convinced that, given my love of Wagner and my longstanding interest in discovering orchestral sonorities at the keyboard, if I doubted that I could make a virtuoso career considering the conditions under which I started out,... I felt irresistably attracted to conducting.... I chafed impatiently for a chance... to direct a Beethoven symphony, a Bach Passion, and more than anything, the operas of Wagner.⁴³

Cortot's opportunity came when Lamoureux, who had just capped more than two decades of proselytizing for Wagner's music with a first Paris full production of Tristan, died in December of 1899. Lamoureux left behind a well-trained orchestra and audience;⁴⁴ his passing also left a void in the top echelon of French Wagnerian professionals. Cortot, though a raw novice to conducting, could not resist the temptation to try to step into the breach. After negotiations with Bayreuth and French patrons (notably, the Comtesse Greffulhe) and much furious rehearsing, he made his debut in May of 1902, conducting--of all works to debut with--the French première of Götterdämmerung, in alternation with a revival of Tristan. He was twenty-four years old.

The whole climate of exaltation and feverish activity surrounding this project was vividly captured in the personal diary of Mimi Girette (1876-1917),⁴⁵ step-daughter of the architect who remodelled the Château d'Eau Theatre for Cortot's Wagner productions, and future wife of Edouard Risler. A few excerpts will suffice to give the general picture:

January 7 1902 - At dinner this evening Fauré, [Maurice] Bagès, Cortot... - Cortot played Crépuscule des dieux! It was an artistic experience that far surpassed many quite respectable orchestral performances....

Tuesday April 22 [1902] - Saturday went to Cortot's orchestra rehearsal. It was the first time the whole ensemble was together in the hall, 1st act Tristan. [He was] quite marvelous to watch conduct - I think it will be superb - it's really his debut we attended.

Tuesday eve May 6 [1902] - Going to rehearsals every day, even twice a day, at the Château d'Eau.... Cortot is

incredible.... He knows the entire thing by heart, he can prompt the words to all the roles, down to the last sixteenth note - he's doing the stage directing all alone,⁴⁶ supervising the smallest details, even the gestures of the "ondines" (remarkable trio), all the movements of the chorus members (2nd act). Today 1st act with Litvinne and Dalmorès (who was lousy) - but Litvinne very good, and the orchestra very good too.... These days we are living "in another world,"... really - anything that is unrelated to this artistic enterprise doesn't interest us. We live apart from all the rest - that will come to an end eventually, and it distresses me to think about it....

Friday eve May 16 [1902] - What an evening, yesterday,⁴⁷ what emotions! orchestra up to its task throughout and better still - it was splendid - at the same time, incidents with the scenery [changes] we didn't expect. 1st stop before the Gribichungen [?], audience ominously silent - at Siegfried's funeral march an interminable, anguishing wait - some malicious remarks from the hall - mocking whispers - Poor Cortot, played the march 2 times and still we thought (he, too, he told me later) they weren't ready.... Then audience very cool, didn't understand anything - called Cortot back at the end, however: and here came this diminutive young man..., pale, modest, looking so exhausted,... so simple. And to think that it was he who engineered this whole, huge project, so... complex; it was extremely touching.... There you have the superiority of the soul; this small being is worth more by himself than all these rich people who deign to applaud a little....

Afterwards we supped with Cortot, Straram, M. Gustave Lyon, Fortuny⁴⁸ and de Beehr (the famous stage director). Cortot was all downcast, looking lost, hanging on our every word, panic-stricken, poor fellow - we cheered him up, and M. Lyon was charming at this - it was imperative to do so, because despite the extraordinary energy he relentlessly put out, the let-down sapped him of the strength necessary to continue to untangle all the complications of this enterprise, which is truly too much for a single man, even him! I have my fingers crossed for the première tomorrow.

Sunday Pentecost May 18 [1902] - The première was splendid, Litvinne marvelous. Audience more receptive than at the public dress rehearsal....

Wednesday May 21 - Yesterday evening unpleasant performance. Castelmann booed - and yet he's a fine Siegfried and quite Wagnerian - poor guy!....

Saturday eve May 31 - ...Cortot's productions are flapping with one wing. Bad actors. Audiences displeased - it's a shame. We listened with infinite pleasure (brought back memories of Bayreuth) to Burgsthaler, the admirable Siegfried who for the first time in '94 led us to know and appreciate this role which is so marvelous, so exquisite and so grandly conceived.

Friday eve June 13 3:00 in the morning - Returning from the last Crépuscule! Unforgettable evening: Bréma, Burgsthaler (Hans Richter conducting). We went to see Bréma in her dressing room after the 2nd act (at her request).... What a weird... impression, finding Brunhilde in this brightly-lit, perfumed room;... Risler was there. Cortot didn't come, which shows that all's not well between him and Bréma - right now he has eyes only for Litvinne!!

Saturday June 14 4:30 - Mama and I have just come from saying goodbye to Bréma.... I'm still emotional.... But Cortot behaved badly toward her, she told us so in as many words. She is indignant, the more so as it really got to her. Yesterday he didn't even shake her hand - the papers didn't mention her, etc.. Cortot is all Litvinne's. But Bréma might never again sing with him. It's really a poor way to treat such a great artist! Tonight closing with Tristan. Dalmorès - yuck! and Litvinne - ugh! What a great voice, but...!! Anyway, one has to applaud Cortot.

Thursday June 19 7:00 - A year ago I began putting these thoughts down. What has changed for the better?...I'm anxious to leave Paris.... Cortot is heard from no more. He is busy now only with Litvinne,... and Litvinne makes no effort to hide it!...⁴⁹

Cortot scored a succès d'estime with his productions, but ended up signing debtor's slips for some 350,000 Francs. Once he had put his hands on a baton, however, he did not find it easy to renounce his conducting ambitions. The following year found him back on the podium, first with an amateur production of Acts I and II of the Marriage of Figaro, then with Wagner and Beethoven projects:

Wednesday morning [January] 28 [1903] - ...Everything has changed as of this morning! We are doing the Mass [in D

major] of Beethoven (Cortot came after lunch) and then Parsifal (1st Act). How many indecisions....

Wednesday eve February 11 11:00 Tomorrow we're dining at Mme. Le Bret's. What a bore! Perhaps Cortot will be there. What will I sing?...Cortot is not going to put on [Fauré's] Prométhée at his concerts⁵⁰ - that's not very kind to Fauré, who's been working on the orchestration for three months. What a misfortune! I didn't know soon enough, otherwise I would have told [Fauré] to go make waves with Mme. Greffuhle - she's in charge of all that...⁵¹

Friday February 13 4:00 Tonight rehearsal of [Beethoven's] Mass.... Yesterday dinner at Mme. Le Bret's.... Cortot accompanied me - I sang "Vision" badly, then did better in "L'Ange" and "Souffrances" of Wagner (which I have coached with Cortot). His lessons interest me almost as much as they intimidate me....

Wednesday March 18 5:30.... Yesterday, orchestral rehearsal of Parsifal at the Nouveau Théâtre: unimaginable and tragicomic scene with these chaste ladies all squashed and stuffed together in the wings and singing like blind bats, without being able to see or hear anything. Straram conducted us. Couldn't see him at all, though he climbed onto a ladder - Cortot furious. It was hilarious... if it wasn't lamentable, because after all it's Tuesday!⁵²

Wednesday April 25 [1903] Great day! sang with orchestra for the first time this morning... soprano solo from Beethoven's Mass.... Success! Cortot very content; never gave me as many enthusiastic compliments, which pleased me more than anyone else's. Cortot's not just anybody. He's even a personality - un être éminent suggestif....

Tuesday eve May 5.... Mass, the 30th went very well - afterwards again with Cortot and the group [at the café] across from the Gare St. Lazare... Risler recital Sunday... unforgettably beautiful.... Saw Reynaldo Hahn, very amusing.... I'll sing his "Etudes latines", they're exquisite - They'll come to dinner (at least Risler will).... Cortot didn't come... it seems he is no longer with Litvinne. Now it's... Mme. Bréal, daughter of Michel Bréal the scholar, now divorced from Romain Rolland.... How will that end? She got what she was after; at the winter concert he told us that she asked him for musical conversations... and he laughed! Well!....

Saturday eve May 9 - ... Talked with Vaudoyer⁵³ about "Cortot's marriage"⁵⁴ because it's definite - he told everyone except Papa - curious thing!.... Poor Litvinne, she did so much for him at the Festival [Crépuscule/Tristan]. Gustave Lyon asked Cortot to think about it several months - he said he would.... Broke the news to Risler, [who was] flabbergasted, and thought at first Cortot was marrying Litvinne. (Risler) said... "If Cortot spent more time working, all these things wouldn't happen to him"....

Tuesday May 12 4:00 Risler came to dinner last night with Reynaldo Hahn..., Mme. and Mlle. Lyon, [Gustave] Fridrich⁵⁵ and Straram.... Risler recreated for us suddenly the Rheingold,... singing all the parts, with the right inflection,... adding all the orchestral parts missing from the (piano) score. Frightening, as Hahn said - what beauty, my God! That's worth living for.... Day before yesterday Fauré came to dine, (with) Landron, Joville, Straram, Vaudoyer and... - Cortot!.... I sang three new songs, once with Fauré and a second time with Cortot, who played them very well - a nice evening also - Fauré in high spirits... - Cortot gloomy the other evening.... What's going on inside this enigmatic personality?.... His look was strange, fixed, haggard - What a shame, such an exceptional person!...⁵⁶

These excerpts from Mimi Girette's diary are of scant critical value in assessing Cortot's conducting achievements, but they afford a fascinating glimpse of Parisian high society at the turn of the century. One gets a sense of the fundamental place that art, and in this instance music, occupied in the lives of some of the French intelligensia. The salon as an institution may have been losing some of the centrality it once enjoyed in French culture,⁵⁷ but it appears to have retained a certain social and artistic viability. Moreover, it continued to play an important role in nurturing the symbiotic relationship existing between the professional cadre of French musicians and the music-loving upper class. It is revealing that a composer of Fauré's stature not only

frequented the Girettes' table (and the salons of Mme. de Saint-Marceaux and the Comtesse Greffuhle as well) but also wrote many mélodies and piano pieces accommodated to the tastes, and sometimes the technical capabilities, of his amateur hosts and admirers.

That special bond that kept French composers and performers attuned to their public's pulse--inordinately so, in the opinion of some critics--was beginning to weaken in the 'nineties, as evidenced first by the more austere styles of Franck's disciples and then by the aestheticism of Debussy and Ravel.⁵⁸ One more fragment of Mimi Girette's diary is of interest in this regard, since it contains ideas picked up during her coaching sessions with Cortot. Here one encounters the notion of music as an exclusive art which should address itself to connoisseurs, but which is often profaned by those anxious to please the bourgeois pretenders to culture:

Friday January 23 [1903] - I'm recopying lines I wrote this summer.... I'll put the observations and interesting musical remarks of Cortot down. I took my first "interpretation" lesson... [on] "L'Ange" [and] "Souffrances" by Wagner. It's fascinating, but how inferior I feel; my poor little talent appears to me in all its nakedness,... so weak.

.....
I prefer the bourgeois when he regards art from afar, as something inaccessible, experiencing beauty respectfully. He is then closer to the truth and understands better the hidden meaning of beauty than when he appropriates it and bourgeoisifies the most beautiful things.

.....
Art should not be accessible to everyone - that demeans it. It's necessary, instead, that all become worthy to approach it; and only in this sense will art be for everyone - But that's still a long way off! All sorts of petty things take on monumental importance [to the

socialites] while really consequential things bore them. Talking, just to say nothing, is truly an affliction in my opinion.

I haven't written anything else since [this summer], although I had more topics after this. My "lecturer" gave me plenty every day in October - 59

The pessimistic, élitist tone of this passage is only a step from the "l'art pour l'art" attitude of Debussy, Busoni and others. It is a position more often associated with musicians influenced by French symbolist aesthetics than with Wagnerians who adhered to the spirit of the original theories and music. "The Friends of Bayreuth," notes Zuckermann, "may have had money, enthusiasm, and patience, but they were certainly not an élite of sensibility. Symbolism is abstract and aristocratic; Wagner is concrete and middle-class."⁶⁰

Cortot's Wagnerism seems to have influenced his pianistic art in three main ways. Musically, the experience of playing--and even more of conducting--Wagner's scores probably sharpened his sense of timing (including rubato), structure and "orchestral" coloring. Stylistically, it intensified whatever predisposition he may have had toward a romantic approach to music, especially as regards the forceful projection of emotion and mood and it enhanced his grasp of the dramatic and declamatory idioms. Aesthetically, through contact with Wagner's music Cortot became saturated in musico-poetic symbolist thinking: the experience no doubt strengthened his flair for finding or creating correspondences between music and extramusical ideas (emotional or psychological states, imagery, poetic qualities, etc.).

Did Cortot believe he could deduce the specific "message" of the work, define the feeling/idea that inspired the composer, in his poetic commentaries? Or was he simply articulating a personal interpretive image arrived at by emotional identification, imagination or some other sort of subjective intuition, that he then rationalized after the fact, as Dukas once observed of Wagner? Rather the latter, one suspects, though some of his statements are ambivalent.⁶¹ There is no doubt, however, that he saw music as endowed with an ideational content and had a strong desire to try to verbalize that content, the better to direct the listener's or the student's associations.

The type of "poetic" exegesis that graces most of Cortot's study editions is absent from his first volumes (dating from 1914-15), devoted to the two sets of Chopin Etudes. These contain mainly remarks on pianistic difficulties and advice on how to practice.⁶¹ The reason may be the abstract nature of the compositions, which militates against literary programs. In subsequent editions his poeticizing commentary tends to grow progressively longer and more complex. His study edition of the Chopin Préludes,⁶³ only the third in the series, already has extensive interpretive annotations. This volume is a case apart, however, for it represents an expanded version of earlier attempts to verbalize the character of the préludes.

Around 1913, Cortot attached programmatic "subtitles" to

the preludes and had them printed in his recital programs.

These subtitles were in some instances revised before being

published in the 1926 study edition. The epithets in their

earliest form clearly show the influence of Wagnerian leitmotif

labels:

Preludes Chopin's indication Cortot's subtitle

1. C major	Agitato	"Isolde feverishly awaiting Tristan"
2. a minor	Lento	"Tristan, dying, awaits the arrival of Isolde"
3. C major	Vivace	"Idyll beside a stream"
4. e minor	Largo	"[Meditation] on a tomb"
5. D major	Allegro molto	"The tree full of songs"
6. b minor	Lento assai	"Helmweh" ("Homeliness")
7. A major	Andantino	"Tender memory"
8. f# minor	Molto agitato	"Snow is falling, a poor man implores, begs alms; people pass by, indifferent"
9. E major	Largo	"Finis Poloniae"
10. c# minor	Allegro molto	"Rockets falling back to earth"
11. B major	Vivace	"Young girl's desire"
12. g# minor	Presto	"Night ride"
13. F# major	Lento	"On a starry night, far from home, thinking of loved ones"
14. Eb minor	Allegro	"Raging wind"
15. Db major	Sostenuto	"A young mother rocks her child - She falls asleep; in a horrible nightmare she sees the gallows that await him - awakening dispels her hallucinations, leaving her anxious nonetheless"
16. Bb minor	Presto con fuoco	"Hurting headlong toward the abyss"
17. Ab major	Allegretto	"She wrote: 'I love you'"
18. f minor	Allegretto	"Imprecations"
19. Eb major	Vivace	"If I were a bird, I would fly to you, my beloved"
20. c minor	Largo	"Funerals"
21. Bb major	Cantabile	"Nessun maggior dolore..."
22. g minor	Molto agitato	"Revolt"

23. F major Moderato "Naiades playing"
 24. d minor Allegro appassionato "Of blood, of voluptuousness, of death"⁶⁴

In the published study edition of the Préludes, the title to No. 1 in C major has been changed from "Isolde attendant fiévreusement Tristan" to "Attente fiévreuse de l'aimée" ("The beloved one [fem.] feverishly waits"); No. 2 in a minor ("Tristan, mourant, attend la venue d'Isolde") has become "Méditation douloureuse: la mer déserte au loin..." ("Sorrowful meditation: the barren sea in the distance..."). The titles to Nos. 4, 5, 10, 11, 12, 16, 18, 20, 22, 23, and 24 have been retained, and Nos. 3, 13, 17 and 19 have undergone only minor modifications. No. 6 ("Heimweh") has had the German word excised. No. 7 ("Souvenir attendri") has taken on a Debussyste--or Baudelairean, to be exact--cast: "Des souvenirs délicieux flottent comme un parfum à travers la mémoire" ("Delightful recollections waft like a perfume across the memory," cf. Debussy's "Les sons et les parfums..."). No. 9 in E major ("Finis Poloniae") has been changed to "Voix prophétiques" ("Prophetic voices"), and No. 10 in c# minor, which came the closest to being a whole program in a sentence, has been shortened to "Mais la Mort et là, dans l'ombre..." ("But Death is there, in the shadows..."), a distinct improvement, poetically, over the first version. The revised subtitles evoke much the same basic mood or emotion as the originals, with perhaps one exception: No. 21 in Bb major ("Nessun maggior dolore...") has been transformed into "Retour

solitaire à l'endroit des aveux" ("Return, alone, to the site of confessions of love"), shedding some of its bathos for a more muted, wistful image. Apart from No. 21, the modifications all bring a greater degree of abstraction. The Wagnerian and German allusions have disappeared, and the imagery in the revised subtitles is more suggestive than explicit. The events of World War I no doubt motivated the first type of alterations, while the more subtle evocative images may reflect the influence of Impressionism.

Critical reaction to some of Cortot's earliest recitals suggests that Wagnerian effects may have insinuated themselves into his interpretive approach to other composers, to dubious advantage. One anonymous writer, reviewing an 1898 recital featuring Beethoven, Liszt and Chopin pieces, commented that Cortot displayed "admirable pianistic means, very great power and alongside this a delicacy which gives his phrasing a marvelous freshness, as well as an unfailing technique to which we owe the superb scales... in Chopin's works," but added at the end of this otherwise very laudatory critique:

Alfred Cortot already possesses a great number of the qualities it takes to make a master of the keyboard. His cultivation of Wagner's works has motivated him to aim for power and very vivid contrasts. [B]ut should this highly logical procedure (forme) leave its imprint [on the music] when it's a matter of interpreting Chopin? We'd like to pose this question to our young friend, in all admiration....⁶⁵

Cortot's Beethovenism.

If Cortot's involvement with Wagner's music has often been noted in discussions of his interpretive style, his attachment to Beethoven's music in the early part of his career (ca. 1895-1910) has very nearly escaped notice. Only Italian critic and musicologist Piero Rattalino reports it as a fact of considerable significance, and speculates on what stylistic approach to Beethoven Cortot may have adopted.⁶⁶ Curiously, while music historians have recognized the influence of Beethoven's music on the French composers who initiated the stylistic renewal (Saint-Saëns, Franck, Gounod),⁶⁷ there seems to have been little if any inquiry into its impact on French pianists. The most important and influential pianists of the late Romantic era--Anton Rubinstein, Hans von Bülow, Eugène d'Albert and even to some extent Ferruccio Busoni--made Beethoven one of the cornerstones of their repertoire. It is surely revealing that the three major French pianists who moved away from the traditional French school--Risler, Cortot and Yves Nat--were likewise deeply involved with Beethoven's music.

Roland Barthes has remarked on the tradition-shattering implications of both the piano works and the Romantic era's image of Beethoven the artist.⁶⁸ Beethoven's late, "romantic" music cannot be accommodated (not without suffering distortion or loss of substance) to the old classicist value system and performance practice. Its individualized, constantly evolving discourse invited (as the nineteenth century saw it) an

intensely personal response, a quest to decipher the subjective "message" embodied in the music. Like Wagner's music, it demanded a different spiritual attitude on the part of the performer. By virtue of its break with the traditional vocalistic performance code ("with Beethoven, the mimetic impulse [guiding the performer] becomes orchestral... and so the idea of an intimist... activity is destroyed; to want to play Beethoven's work is to see oneself as the conductor of an orchestra," writes Barthes),⁶⁹ it called for a new praxis: greater sound mass and timbric variety, greater arm participation and weight, greater emotional involvement. It is surely no coincidence that in the years Cortot was forging a style of his own, he was wrestling with some of Beethoven's most challenging works, following essentially the same path that Rislé had blazed.

Cortot had already taken up several of the thornier sonatas during his student years: Op. 53 (the "Waldstein") in 1892, Op. 57 ("Appassionata") and Op. 111 in '93 and '95, respectively. For his Parisian orchestral debut with the Concerts Colonne in November 1897, he chose Beethoven's Concerto No. 3 in c minor. In his Berlin solo debut, January 13, 1898, he again opted for Beethoven, performing the Sonatas Op. 81a and Op. 101 together with Franck's Prélude, chorale et fugue.⁷⁰ He incorporated the same two sonatas into a pair of recitals given in Paris on March 23 and April 6 [?] of 1898. Reviewing the second of these, critic A. de Sivry noted that

Cortot had already shed all "schoolish" traces from his playing, which displayed a "powerful personality... and a distinctive character and color that differentiate it noticeably from that of other virtuosi."

...Cortot possesses in the highest degree a comprehensive insight into the composer...: he goes deeply into the music, dissects it, examines it under the microscope with his eyes of a twenty-year old and his artistic soul. When he comes to the piano... he knows how to take possession of it, master it and draw from it every bit of vibrancy and expressiveness it can muster.

This powerful conception of the pianistic art, this youthful fire which Cortot has in such ample measure, are not without certain drawbacks.... Cortot is high-strung, first by physical constitution and then by his mind [which is] essentially impressionable under the influence of external factors. The result is a certain roughness, a brusqueness, particularly when the artist personifies Beethoven or Chopin....⁷¹

It is conceivable that the "roughness" mentioned above, perhaps analagous to the "harshness" noted by Thomas in 1895, was a consequence of Cortot's efforts to expand the range of his sonority into higher dynamic extremes and to achieve the dramatic contrasts and fiery rhetoric characteristic of a romantic Beethoven pianism.

For some reason, Cortot added few new Beethoven sonatas to his repertoire during the next decade (1900-1910) apart from Op. 106 ("Hammerklavier"), which he programmed in an April 1910 recital. Instead, he took up the orchestral and chamber music.⁷² In 1908 he performed the Triple Concerto with Thibaud and Casals, and the following year he played all five piano concerti and the Choral Fantasia, Op. 80 in two concerts.⁷³ The fact of playing six concerti in two evenings, right in the

middle of a "war against concertos" which saw some Paris virtuosi booed off the stage (one even had her piano spirited away by the public), caused a mild furor. Cortot's audacity and success were widely written up. In 1909 he conducted the Association Symphonique of Lille in the nine symphonies.

Cortot's partnership with Jacques Thibaud in duo and with Thibaud and Casals in trio (from 1906) naturally led him to Beethoven's chamber works. In the period 1907-1910 Cortot played the two Trios Op. 70, the "Archduke" Trio (Op. 97) and the Variations, Op. 44 (on an Original Theme) and Op. 121a (on "Ich bin der Schneider Kakadu"). He presented the complete Sonatas and Variations for 'cello/piano with Casals, and the Sonatas for violin/piano Op. 24 ("Spring"), Op. 30, No. 2 and Op. 47 ("Kreutzer") with Thibaud.

Until the 1920's Cortot's reputation outside of France rested as much on his success as a Beethoven interpreter as on his Chopin and Franck performances.⁷⁴ Cortot's interpretive teachings on the Beethoven sonatas and concerti⁷⁵ suggest that he subscribed to the late Romantic image of Beethoven as a world-storming Titan who threw off the shackles of tradition, and whose music weaves fantastic, tragic, demonic and cosmic themes together in a moving drama of human passions and moods.⁷⁶ What appealed to him most in Beethoven's music was its originality and revolutionary character: the daring formal and harmonic innovations, the dynamic energy, the direct and often vehement character of his expression⁷⁷ and most

significantly, the dramatic juxtaposition of ideas of contrasting emotional character.⁷⁸ Discussing the Sonata Op. 111, he remarked: "In this sonata we have to shift... between [expressive] extremes whose antithetical qualities clash. It is not from our moderating Latin temper that we can conjure up the violent, fierce and intensely contrasted interpretations befitting Beethoven's works."⁷⁹

Inspired by Wagnerian symbolist thinking and perhaps by von Bülow, whose ideas on the last sonatas he often cited, Cortot developed the habit--almost a compulsion--of translating the expressive elements he saw connoted in Beethoven's music into vivid metaphoric images.⁸⁰ Not surprisingly, he claimed to detect analogies between the character of a number of Beethoven's themes and that of certain leitmotifs of Wagner.⁸¹

After studying Cortot's slim legacy of Beethoven recordings, Rattalino concluded that:

in the Sonata Op. 109 and in the Scherzo movement of Op. 106, notwithstanding the reservations that the piano roll always prompts, one can detect an interpretive style that is probably influenced by the example of [Eugène] d'Albert and no doubt that of Risler, who studied for some time with d'Albert.

One cannot, however, undertake a definitive critical assessment of these interpretations since the sole basis of comparison would be the d'Albert edition of the Beethoven Sonatas and a few piano rolls by d'Albert (but not Op. 106 and 109). Performances of Op. 106 and 109 by d'Albert, Risler, Busoni, - that is, by the major Beethoven interpreters that Cortot had a chance to hear in youth - are lacking. The chamber music [recorded by Cortot] furnishes a more solid documentation, but here the personality of Cortot perforce interacts with that of his partners. Assuredly, the Cortot one discovers in the Sonata Op. 47 and in the Trio Op. 97 is not the Cortot with which one is familiar: is the difference of style due to the influence of the people who played with him,

to the demands of ensemble music, to a conscious desire to differentiate Beethoven stylistically? One can only conjecture.

Cortot's Beethoven repertoire and his interpretations of Op. 47 and of Op. 97 nonetheless lead one to suppose that he intended to situate Beethoven in the sphere of Romanticism and Romantic heroism, in line with the critical views of the Wagnerite [Téodor] de Wyzewa or those of Romain Rolland (...whose ex-wife, Clotilde, Cortot wed in his first marriage...). It may also be assumed that the study of Beethoven prompted Cortot to examine critically the culture in which he had been formed and the traditions of that culture. French mannerism, however, remained without a doubt the foundation of Cortot's cultural formation.⁸²

While Cortot's writings leave no doubt as to his romantic perspective on Beethoven, his performances of Op. 109 and the Scherzo of Op. 106 on piano roll are not so easily categorized. They are rather disappointing--not because of the bottom-heavy sound and compressed dynamic range (both of which could be due to technical inadequacies of the rolls) but because Cortot for once sounds musically and stylistically ill-at-ease.⁸³

Especially in Op. 109 the playing is nervous and flurried. The tempi are on the fast side, and there are a good many arbitrary tempo changes in the small dimension, i.e., within musical periods. The textures are clear (Cortot pedals very sparingly) but lack vigor, rhythmic profile and polyphonic differentiation. There is little of the breadth and overall grasp of structure which usually distinguish his interpretations. Here and there the dynamic accentuation or the declamation has an abrupt, jagged quality. The interpretation has moments of poetry and fire when an eloquently contoured phrase, a well-paced drive to a climax, a

beautifully organized bass line rivet the listener's attention, but all in all the performance lacks stylistic authority and solidity. His Scherzo from Op. 106 is a stronger reading from the standpoint of formal cohesion, dynamic contrasts and force of characterization, but it too suffers from short-range thinking, unsettled tempi and occasional erratic rhythms. In short, as far as can be determined from the pitifully inadequate documentation of his solo Beethoven playing, Cortot would seem to have grafted a romantic treatment of tempo and agogics onto an otherwise "French mannerist" approach to Beethoven without yet having achieved a personal synthesis of these elements.

The Beethoven chamber works recorded with Thibaud and Casals in the period 1926-1929 are by contrast among Cortot's best pressings. The problems of rashness, tempo eccentricities, hard or brittle sonority in the upper dynamic levels and keyboard register and excessive rubato that mar the solo performances are rare in the ensemble pieces. Here Cortot's playing is both more controlled and more poetic: full of contained intensity, ardor, discrete agogic and dynamic shadings and structural logic. Stylistically and pianistically, Cortot displays a greater command of his means. His delivery is more direct and less self-conscious. Above all, there is an immense gain in spirituality and emotional depth, a new "interiority" evident in Cortot's playing with the Trio. Instead of the gestures of espressivo enacted on the

sensuous surface of the music--exploited, so to speak, as elements of an interpretation--there is heartfelt feeling and a striving to capture the very essence of the musical ideas. The choice of expressive means, of sonority, phrasing, articulation, agogics, tonal proportions between lines--all the particulars through which the musical discourse is realized in sounding form--seem to be the natural outcome of a deep empathy with the spirit and substance of the composition. In the chamber medium at least, Cortot seems to have somehow come to terms with Beethoven.

The music of Beethoven, and to a lesser degree that of Schumann, Wagner⁸⁴ and even Brahms, made demands on French pianists of the 1870-1900 generations that placed them in a potential dilemma. There were avenues of escape; one could side-step the issue by simply not performing the literature, an option that became increasingly attractive from ca. 1905-10 when Debussy, Ravel and others began creating a body of French piano literature capable of winning acceptance into the international repertoire. Another way out was to blithely ignore the problem by transposing the Austro-Germanic piano literature into a French mannerist key in performance. This denatured the music's essential character but left the pianist's style undisturbed and self-consistent. The works of Beethoven and later German masters became the "acid test" for Cortot, Rislér, Nat and others. In facing up to the rich reality of the music and its interpretive demands, they were

obliged to rethink their ideas and ways of playing. They adjusted in different ways and to varying degrees; yet each evolved new perspectives and pianistic means that brought him closer to the mainstream of cosmopolitan performance practice. Collectively, their initiatives helped to "put French culture back in touch with European issues (problematiche),"⁸⁵ as Rattalino aptly notes.

Cortot did not capitalize on his deepening understanding of Beethoven to rework and expand his Beethoven repertoire after the nineteen-twenties.⁸⁶ Nor did he create a performance style of any real influence on later Beethoven interpreters. Instead, he assimilated the interpretive and pianistic lessons learned in coming to grips with Beethoven (and Wagner), and with his art thus fortified and enriched, he concentrated his efforts on illuminating and revitalizing Chopin, Schumann and Franck. Cortot's interpretations and recordings of Chopin and Schumann in the 'thirties were landmarks in the history of performance. Perhaps no other artist did more to sensitize the critical public and fellow professionals to the genius of these composers and to their right to be ranked among the greatest.

Cortot was far too discerning and original an interpreter to have merely recast Chopin and Schumann in a Beethovenian mold. It seems to this author, however, that a good many of the stylistic qualities that made Cortot a great interpreter of Chopin and Schumann--the conceptual breadth and emotional force, the virility and grasp of the heroic and the dramatic

elements, the timbric variety and feel for latent structural tensions, as well as the vision of an overall psycho-dynamic logic in larger works and cycles of pieces--these qualities were forged in part in the strong crucible of Beethoven's music.

Conductor, Animateur and Chamber Musician.

After his Wagnerian escapades, Cortot continued to concentrate much of his energies on conducting until 1907-08, the year in which he was named professor of a Conservatoire piano class, and likewise the year when engagements for the Trio began flooding in. In 1903 he founded the Association des Grandes Auditions Chorales and the Association des Concerts Alfred Cortot. With these two groups, he began to develop his skills as an organizer and an "educator" in the broad sense. Cortot made a special point of promoting masterworks that were little known in France. With the choral society he presented the already mentioned Missa Solemnis of Beethoven, as well as the first complete French performances of Brahms' Requiem and Liszt's Sainte-Elizabeth. With the orchestra he premiered in France Liszt's Fest-Klange, Albéric Magnard's Hymne à la justice and Albert Roussel's Vendanges, and also performed Chausson's Poème de l'amour et de la mer and works by Liszt, Moussorgsky, Guillaume Lekeu, Franck, Fauré, Chabrier, Ladmirault and a number of lesser-known contemporaries. Many of the works were receiving their first or second public performances in Paris. Cortot presented the modern works in an

"open rehearsal" series outside of the regular subscription concerts. This format gave the young composers a public hearing, while affording the audience a somewhat greater exposure to the new music. The symphonic concerts of the Société Nationale de Musique, which he conducted from 1904-1908, were almost exclusively devoted to new or unfamiliar works.

When Cortot's own concert society folded for lack of funds after a little more than a year's existence, he accepted the principal conductorship of the Association Symphonique of Lille, a post he held from 1905 to 1910.⁸⁷ At Lille he gave first local performances of a number of important works, including Franck's Symphonie in d minor and excerpts from Berlioz' Armide, Félicien David's Désert and Monteverdi's Orfeo. Cortot also initiated an ambitious music appreciation project involving a multi-part "History of the Symphony."

In this early phase of his career, Cortot often appeared in concert with eminent singers of the day, such as Marie Olénine (with whom he gave the second hearing in France of Moussorgsky's songs), Marcella Pregi, and the Wagnerians Litvinne and Van Dyck. He acquired a passion for the art song repertoire that persisted the rest of his life, leading to memorable recitals with some of the era's luminaries: Maggie Teyte, Marya Freund, Charles Panzéra, Claire Croiza, Germaine Lubin, Lotte Schoene, Madeleine Grey, Gérard Souzay, etc.

The piano trio that Cortot established with Jacques Thibaud and Pablo Casals in 1906 was neither permanent (in the sense of rehearsing regularly the year round) nor makeshift; it could best be described as seasonal. The partners assembled each spring to prepare concerts and to tour. As Jean Loubier points out, the Thibaud/Casals/Cortot Trio was exceptional in many respects. For the first half of its existence, until the founding of the Busch Trio in 1920, it was the only established trio that regularly toured abroad and that achieved truly international celebrity. Moreover, in contrast to other well-known trios active between the wars whose members were primarily or uniquely chamber musicians, the Thibaud/Casals/Cortot Trio may constitute the "sole instance in history of three giants of solo performance who, though drawn apart by their amazing individual careers, met and played together over almost thirty years."⁸⁸ In addition to appearing regularly in duo with Thibaud⁸⁹ and in the early years with Casals, Cortot also performed with other fine string players, including violinists Maurice Hayot, Jules Boucherit (these two before World War I), Eugène Ysaÿe, Georges Enesco, Fritz Kreisler and Yehudi Menuhin, and 'cellists Pierre Fournier, Diran Alexanian, George Pitsch and Lennart de Zwegberg.

Cortot's involvement as a conductor with the great orchestral, operatic and choral literature, combined with the extensive practical experience he gained performing the chamber

and song repertoires, gave his artistry a musical depth and an expressive and tonal richness that few specialized virtuosi of the piano could hope to equal.

"I owe more than I can put into words to [my] chamber music experiences," Cortot admitted,

and first of all to the [opportunities I had to] accompany several great singers in the lieder of Schubert, Schumann, Brahms and Fauré, wherein the musical message takes on such a penetrating, and in a way, such an explicit meaning in its expressive appropriateness to the poetic text and its implications....

I have always considered [the great song literature] one of the most convincing manifestations of the magical power of the sonorous art. And I learned a great deal about how to shape melodic ideas expressively on my instrument from my contacts with great singers like Félicia Litvinne, whose miraculous voice I've already praised, the admirable Dutch baritone [Ernst] Van Dyck, Maria Bréma and Marya Freund (with whom I made a number of tours). [T]he joy of collaborating artistically with them in no way minimized the importance of the piano's role in my eyes, but on the contrary endowed it with an indefinable quality of communicative presence. For me, it was a rare musical privilege....⁹⁰

.....
After Rislér, the individual from whom I learned the most musically... was the man who in my opinion was the greatest interpreter of our time: the incomparable 'cellist Pablo Casals. He was, and still is in my estimation, the model of the artist born for music, for whom all the facets of lyricism were elements of an expressive communication which ranged from a tone of shared intimacy to one of sovereign, virtuosic authority.

I can say that [Casals], the marvelous Wagnerian singer Maria Bréma and Georges Enesco were among the best counsellors I had on my interpretive mission.... From the moment I met Enesco (when he first arrived at the Conservatoire),... I understood that being merely a pianist was not enough to fulfill the aspirations of a musician enamored of his art, and that I should broaden my horizons to encompass vaster realms than would be open to one who confined himself to a single professional sphere.⁹¹

.....
In enumerating all the different sorts of musical experiences through which I tried to enrich my approach... and the great examples that inspired me, I

want to mention again the inestimable value of all that I discovered or learned from the playing of my two partners [in the Trio, Thibaud and Casals].... More than they knew, and more than the best exponents of the pianistic art were able to, they taught me to play the piano according to my innermost desires, free of constraining concerns with virtuosity for its own sake. They inspired me to match with my instrument--defying its intrinsic sonorous limitations--the élans, the impassioned outpourings, the intimate or moving lyricism which they created with the persuasive inflections of their magical bows.⁹²

Chapter IV: Notes

¹Social, political and economic unrest all contributed to the crisis of the mid-1880s. Perhaps the major cause, however, was the influx of new philosophies--Schopenhauer's in particular--which tended to undermine traditional ways of viewing reality and art. Cf. Sven Loevgren, The Genesis of Modernism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), especially the Preface and Chapter I, pp. vii-63; also Shattuck, The Banquet Years, especially Part I, "Turn of the Century," pp. 3-42.

German music and aesthetic theories (via Wagnerism) and nationalistic initiatives to counter the German influence (the Société Nationale de Musique, the revival of early music, the research on plain chant and folk music) also spurred the French creative revitalization. Another contributing factor was the "changing of the guard." In the 1890s Lalo, Delibes, Chabrier and Chausson passed from the scene, as did two initiators of the musical renaissance, Franck (d. 1890) and Gounod (d. 1893), leaving the way open for the younger generation to assert its stylistic identity. Debussy's Quartet ('93) and Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faun ('94) brought him to the threshold of the modern era; his Pelléas dates from 1902. Ravel's Jeux d'eau appeared in 1901, his Quartet in 1902-03. Others found in Wagner the fuel to ignite a belated romanticism (e.g., Dukas' Symphony in C, d'Indy's Fervaal). Even an older composer like Fauré seemed to find new vitality in the '90s (Prométhée, La Bonne Chanson, incidental music for Pelléas et Mélisande). Satie retreated into silence around 1898, took basic counterpoint lessons from Roussel and emerged in 1910 to recognition and a second productive career.

²See Gut and Pistone, La Musique de chambre en France, pp. 74-75; and Debussy's views from a 1910 interview, as quoted by William Austin, Music in the 20th Century (New York: Norton, 1966), p. 31. •

³The Wagnerism that was captivating French artists and musicians was more than a little responsible for this shift of values. Marguerite Long's account in Au piano avec Gabriel Fauré (Paris: Billaudot, 1963), pp. 19-20, of her beginnings as a "society" pianist and interpreter of salon music (Lack, Godard, Thomé) and her progressive disenchantment with that role and with her playing, suggests that a shift of outlook occurred in pianists who held to the classicist tradition as well.

⁴See, for instance, the letters of Edouard Risler to Reynaldo Hahn in the 1890s, quoted in Taylor, "...Edouard Risler," pp. 30-31.

⁵A child prodigy, Pugno won his 1^o Prix (piano) at 14, and then took prizes in harmony, fugue and organ. After a promising debut he was more or less blacklisted for his political sympathies with the Commune (see A.C., p. 50). He labored for years in obscurity as a church organist, teacher and ghost-writer of popular operettas. His concert career was launched by luck when he stepped in for an ailing Diémer in a performance of the Grieg Concerto with the Société des Concerts on Dec. 23, 1893. He won immediate artistic recognition but later confessed that he had to play 17 more times gratis with Colonne before receiving a share of the box office receipts. Only a few years later Pugno began his prestigious association with the violinist Eugène Ysaye.

⁶Cf. Leschetitzky's characterization of the French (quoted in Annette Hullah, Theodor Leschetitzky [London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1906], pp. 72-73) as "birds of passage, flying lightly up in the clouds, unconscious of what lies below. They are dainty, crisp, clear-cut in their playing, and they phrase well."

⁷A.C., p. 233. Reviews of the day described Pugno's sonority as "suave," "radiant," "a blend of crystal and velvet," etc.

⁸Louis Fleury ("Souvenirs....," Monde Musical, 36, No. 1-2 [Jan. 31, 1925], p. 10) wrote that "Pugno had only to place his robust, fleshy hands on the keys of the most atrociously tinny piano to draw a ravishing tone from it." Physical build certainly is not the only determinant of tone quality, but it counted for a lot back when little was known and taught about other conditioning factors. Pugno, like Anton Rubinstein, was a large, corpulent man with wide shoulders, powerful arms and exceptionally agile hands.

⁹Cours d'interprétation, p. 221.

¹⁰A.C., p. 50.

¹¹Ibid, p. 79.

¹²At his earliest concerts (1896-1900) Cortot's playing was praised above all for its charm, delicacy and grace, though critics usually also mentioned his power and sharp dynamic contrasts.

¹³Pugno's recordings are not a faithful representation of his whole art. They have given rise to the notion that he was only a miniaturist, when in fact he was probably the sole French pianist of note playing the big late-Romantic concerti (Brahms' Concerto No. 2 and Rachmaninoff's Concerto No. 2, to name only two) before World War I.

¹⁴Pugno was one of the few French pianists who could have inspired Cortot to experiment with subtle pedaling effects. Risler's recordings reveal a simpler, more sparing use of pedal with one striking exception--Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody No. 11 --which shows a refined and highly imaginative use of both pedals.

¹⁵"I was reminded of [Anton] Rubinstein," wrote Pierre Lalo in "Edouard Risler, le quatuor Capet," a tribute in Le Figaro, Oct. 29, 1943 (reprinted in De Rameau à Ravel [Paris: Albin Michel, 1947]), "not because Risler imitated him,... but because they both... combined physical gifts and an extraordinarily powerful technique with admirable musical feeling and intelligence.... Like Rubinstein, Risler was never harsh or dry.... He had power and breadth,... as well as delicacy and lightness.... One was no longer aware of the instrument: only the music remained, and the spirit which interpreted it."

¹⁶Risler's recordings are few and very rare. They include performances of Chopin's Valse Op. 64, No. 2 and Nocturne in F# major, Op. 15, No. 2 (1917, paired on Pathé Saphir 9539), Etude Op. 10, No. 5 and Mazurka Op. 17, No. 4; Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody No. 11 (ca. 1910); the Scherzo (II) from Beethoven's Sonata Op. 31, No. 3 in Eb major, and the Andante con moto (II) from his Concerto No. 4 (Risler plays both the solo and orchestra parts); and short works by Weber, Saint-Saëns, Granados and Chabrier. Pugno is known to have recorded eighteen sides for the Paris Gramophone and Typewriter Co. in 1903, including Chopin's Impromptu in Ab, Op. 29, Valse in Ab, Op. 34, No. 1, Nocturne in F# Major, Op. 15, No. 2, Berceuse, and the "Funeral March" from the Sonata No. 2 in Bb minor (all reissued on Rococo 2009); and pieces by Handel, Scarlatti, Weber, Chabrier, Liszt and Pugno. There are also pre-1912 performances of the Chopin Ballade No. 1 in g minor and Nocturne in g minor, Op. 37, No. 1 (Hupfeld 13731) on piano rolls.

¹⁷The term was used by Donald Grout with reference to the styles of Saint-Saëns, Massenet and Charpentier among others (see A History of Western Music [New York: Norton, 1960], p. 599).

¹⁸From 1896 Risler set a standard of programming unrivalled in France: he played the cycle of 32 Beethoven sonatas about five times, both volumes of the Well-Tempered Clavier and a great deal of Liszt. He may have been one of the first pianists to ever play the complete works of Chopin. He also gave historical recitals à la Anton Rubinstein and was a stalwart champion of modern French music.

¹⁹Cortot, "En Souvenir d'Edouard Risler," Monde Musical, 41, No. 6 (June 30, 1930), pp. [221]-222.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹"Risler had a profound respect for the written page," noted a critic who signed himself "Ed. C." in the eulogy "Edouard Risler," published in the Tribune (Geneva) July 24, 1929 (press clipping, Risler archives, no pag.). "He asserted that everything could be found in the music, that it was not necessary to add or change anything, that it sufficed to know how to read out of the score what the composer had put into it."

²²"Je lui dois la révélation totale des données de l'interprétation pianistique et de la métamorphose qu'elle peut opérer sur la traduction convaincante d'une oeuvre quelconque, par le choix et la diversité des timbres que lui sont assujettis. Et je mets en réserve la qualité de la conduite d'une idée mélodique, ainsi que la mise en valeur significative des rythmes moteurs et de leurs particularités suggestives dont il était le détenteur...." (Cortot/Entretiens, "La Révélation.")

²³Alan Walker, Franz Liszt, I. The Virtuoso Years, 1811-1847 (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1983), p. 173.

²⁴"Révélation, vous dis-je, et dont un magnifique morceau de Mendelssohn, les Variations sérieuses, furent le prétexte fortuit. Risler... vint un jour chez mes parents dans le moment que j'essayais de donner une physionomie à l'admirable composition dont Diémer m'avait conseillé l'étude. Il s'intéressa à mon effort dépourvu de signification, sinon de correction digitale. Et, se mettant au piano, il ouvrit à mon imagination l'horizon émerveillé d'une musique qui non seulement paraissait née de l'inspiration du moment, mais encore transmise à l'entendement par des moyens de coloration orchestrale dont je ne soupçonnais ni l'existence, ni les ressources incroyablement éloquentes. Je puis dire que c'est de ce moment que j'ai compris ce que m'ordonnait la musique et dans quel sens il me fallait entendre non plus l'exercice d'une profession, mais - quelque excessif ou présomptueux que puisse paraître le terme que je vais employer - l'accomplissement d'une mission et qui transcendait la notion du métier quotidien. Je savais, je voyais, je croyais, j'étais désabusé!" (Entretiens, "La Révélation.")

²⁵They, of course, had taken over ideas elaborated by an earlier group of German writers and musicians (most importantly, Jean Paul, E.T.A. Hoffmann and Robert Schumann) in the first decades of the nineteenth century.

²⁶Hahn, excerpt from a transcript of a tribute to Risler prepared for radio broadcast, date unknown [1940's]. Courtesy Risler family archives.

²⁷Cortot/Entretiens, "Autour de Wagner."

²⁸Paul Dukas, a less rabid Wagnerian than some, wrote that as a young student in 1884 he had rejected Chabrier's España on first hearing because "...the revelation of Wagner, still so controversial at the time, and my fanatical admiration for Gluck, Beethoven and Berlioz made me conceive of music from the most elitist perspective. I couldn't bear the idea that someone would laugh in the sanctuary." Quoted in Georges Favre, Paul Dukas (Paris: La Colombe, 1948), pp. 14-15.

²⁹Zuckermann, The First Hundred Years of Wagner's Tristan (New York: Columbia U. Press, 1964), pp. 116-117.

³⁰D'Indy appointed the 24-year old Risler to the piano faculty of the Schola Cantorum in 1897, soon after the school opened. Risler stayed only a few years but later often performed d'Indy's music, especially his difficult Sonata. The two collaborated on an edition of Beethoven's piano sonatas during World War I.

³¹The founding members of Franck's circle were Alexis de Castillon, Vincent d'Indy, Henri Duparc, Ernest Chausson, Charles Bordes, Guy Ropartz and Pierre de Bréville. Citing the research of Jann Pasler, Elaine Brody reports that around 1894 Cortot often attended the musical soirées hosted by painter Henri Lerolle and his brother-in-law Ernest Chausson. The Franckists, Paul Dukas, Isaac Albeniz and pianist Blanche Selva regularly frequented the Lerolle salon, which on occasion also drew Debussy, Fauré, Emmanuel Chabrier, Alberic Magnard, Eric Satie, Eugène Ysaye, Jacques Thibaud, Armand Parent and Camille Chevillard. See Elaine Brody, Paris: The Musical Kaleidoscope, 1870-1925 (New York: Braziller, 1987), p. 122 and p. 311, note 53.

³²As reported by Jacques Feschotte in "Figure contemporaine: Alfred Cortot," article of unknown provenance, ca. 1955. Copy courtesy of Antoinette Risler; text on file at the Institut National de l'Audio-visuel (Archives écrites).

³³Entretiens, "Autour de Wagner."

³⁴Bertrand, Le Monde de la Musique, p. 25.

³⁵Edgar Varèse, an "angry young man" of music, did not remain on good terms with either d'Indy or Cortot for long. According to Louise Varèse (Varèse. A Looking-Glass Diary [New York: Norton, 1972] pp. 31, 74), "Varèse soon came to resent what he

called d'Indy's bigotry, pedantry and arrogance" and "to detest Cortot for being, in his eyes, 'a filthy snob... [who] wanted to forget his peasant origins and to conceal them from the people on the social hill he was bent on climbing... [and who] licked boots to get ahead, or I should say slippers, for he had been boosted to popularity by women more easily flattered than men by a man.'"

³⁶D'Indy kept a very tight grip on the Société Nationale, so tight in fact that composers who did not subscribe to his methods and ideals felt compelled to break away in 1909 and found their own Société Nationale Indépendente.

³⁷Zuckermann (op. cit., p. 85) notes that between the 1861 Tannhäuser performance and 1895 only two Wagner operas, Lohengrin and Die Walküre, were given full performances in Paris. The symphonic societies played only the most popular excerpts and the piano reductions were beyond the grasp of amateurs. Hence, the need for private performances with professional pianists. Debussy himself "played Tristan and Parsifal in society to finance the composition of Pelléas."

³⁹Cortot/Entretiens, "Autour de Wagner."

⁴⁰See A.C., pp. 53-93 for Gavoty's account of Cortot's discovery of Wagner and subsequent performance projects. At the risk of appearing to quibble over minutiae in a biography with few scholarly pretensions, certain parts of Gavoty's account of Cortot's first visit to Bayreuth in 1896 (pp. 61-70) need amending. According to the biography, Risler met Cortot when Cortot arrived in Bayreuth, and then took him to the theatre where Act II of Siegfried was being rehearsed. There Cortot experienced some sort of "nirvana" that left him unable to make his way to his quarters alone. Later Risler supposedly allowed Cortot to "officially take over some of his responsibilities" as a coach and conducting-assistant to Richter, Mottl and Siegfried Wagner. An unpublished letter from Diémer to Risler depicts events differently. The letter, dated August 20, 1896, establishes that Cortot attended only the second series of performances and therefore probably never saw Risler at Bayreuth that summer, Risler having left unexpectedly for Freiburg on learning of the death of a beloved aunt. Did Cortot take over some of Risler's duties? Perhaps, but under circumstances very different than those related by Gavoty. For the text of Diémer's letter and a corroborative letter by Cortot, see Appendix I, pp. 566-71.

⁴¹Program in the Risler family archives.

⁴²Invited to Bayreuth by Gustave Lyon after his prize-winning performance at the 1896 concours, Cortot charmed his way into Wahnfried and was asked to play at the last of Cosima Wagner's

soirées in August of that year. He performed Liszt's St. François de Paule marchant sur les flots--not one of the Rhapsodies, as was mistakenly reported in the French press and by Gavoty (A.C., p. 66). In 1897 Cortot was asked back to Wahnfried, where he performed a four-hand march by Schubert with Risler on a July 30th program that included singers Ernestine Schumann-Heink and Frieda Gartner.

⁴³Entretiens, "Autour de Wagner."

⁴⁴See Riggins, op. cit., pp. 253-56.

⁴⁵Mimi (Emilie) Girette, daughter of Mme. Jean Girette and Michel Soalhat, was an amateur singer of some talent. She took coaching sessions on interpretation with Cortot, Reynaldo Hahn and Fauré, who dedicated his song "Accompagnement" to her. She was courted by Cortot around 1901, prior to the Götterdämmerung production.

⁴⁶Cortot's co-director Willy Schütz, the brother of soprano Félia Litvinne and the co-organizer with Lamoureux of the 1899 Paris Tristan production, was more of a liability than a help according to Gavoty (A.C., p. 87). He vastly exceeded budgets on scenery and costumes, then disappeared when it became apparent that the project was going to lose a lot of money.

⁴⁷May 15, 1902 was the public dress rehearsal for the Crépuscule des Dieux.

⁴⁸Walter Straram was one of the coaches for Cortot's Crépuscule production; he founded a respected symphony orchestra between the wars. Gustave Lyon, inventor of the chromatic harp, was one of the directors of Pleyel. Fortuny may have been Mario Fortuny, the fashion designer, or Fortunio (son of the painter), who invented the lighting system used for the Wagner productions at the Château d'Eau Theatre.

⁴⁹Cortot was indeed very close with Russian-born dramatic soprano Félia Litvinne (1863-1936), née Françoise-Jeanne Schütz, who was reported to have had the biggest and most naturally beautiful voice of any singer active in France at that time. She had created Isolde at the 1899 French première of Tristan and she was also a much-appreciated interpreter of Fauré. With Litvinne Cortot made his first recordings in 1902. She helped bail him out of his debts and let him have her apartment until his marriage in 1903. She remained very fond of him (see Litvinne, Ma vie et mon art: souvenirs [Paris: Librairie Plon, 1933]).

⁵⁰Cortot had already conducted a complete performance of Prométhée with amateur singers, including Jean and Mimi Girette at the Girette's home on February 22, 1902. Fauré and Mme.

Girette played the orchestral reduction on two pianos. The audience was not enthusiastic, and Cortot probably had second thoughts about producing the orchestrated work in public performance.

⁵¹The Comtesse Greffulhe, née Elizabeth de Caraman-Chimay, provided the financial backing for Cortot's Crépuscule/Tristan productions. She was founder and principal patroness of the Société des grandes auditions musicales.

⁵²Cortot conducted a cut version of Parsifal on April 7 and 11, 1903. He claimed to have had verbal permission from Cosima Wagner to do so, but she published a denunciatory letter saying the contrary. That same year the Metropolitan Opera (New York) also broke the ban on performing the opera outside of Bayreuth.

⁵³Jean-Louis Vaudoyer, writer. The Vaudoyer family were fanatical music lovers and Wagnerians who gave many private opera performances, including the Marriage of Figaro fragments that Cortot conducted in January of 1903.

⁵⁴On June 20, 1903 (not 1902, as stated in A.C., pp. 96, 98) Cortot was married to Clotilde Bréal. Her father, Michel Bréal, was one of the founders of the science of semantics and held a chair in that discipline at the Collège de France.

⁵⁵Gustave Fridrich, brother-in-law of Risler and a violinist in the Bayreuth orchestra.

⁵⁶Excerpts from the unpublished diary of Mimi Girette, formerly in the Risler family archives, now in the B.N., Département de la Musique.

⁵⁷See Shattuck, op. cit., pp. 4, 8-11.

⁵⁸Note, however, that it was Maurice Bagès, an amateur tenor, who premiered Debussy's two "Ariettes oubliées" at the Société National de Musique. Bagès also gave the first performance of many Fauré works, including La Bonne Chanson and "Clair de lune."

⁵⁹From the unpublished diary of Mimi Girette.

⁶⁰Zuckermann, p. 114.

⁶¹On the one hand Cortot said that behind all music, pure or program, is a feeling, a matrix idea which inspired the composer and which the interpreter "must recapture and convey to the listener." On the other hand, he argued that the interpreter should be guided by the music and his personal feeling for it in determining its basic meaning or character,

and should trust his instincts even over a supposedly authoritative document establishing the "emotional character" of a work.

⁶²Chopin, 12 Etudes, Op. 10 and 12 Etudes, Op. 25. Edition de travail par A. Cortot (Paris: Maurice Sénart, 1914-[17]) in one or two volumes. The Sénart catalogue was later absorbed by Salabert, the present publisher of Cortot's editions.

⁶³Chopin, 24 Préludes, Op. 28, Edition de travail par A. Cortot (Paris: Ed. Sénart, 1926).

⁶⁴The epigram for No. 24 ("Du sang, de la volupté, de la mort...") is taken from Maurice Barrès, who entitled one of his works thus. Cortot had subtitles printed on a recital program of 1913 given in Manchester, England. The ones reproduced here are from a program given at the Salle des Agriculteurs, Paris, in May of 1914 and reprinted in the Monde Musical, 22, No. 9 (May 30, 1914), p. 158.

⁶⁵Unsigned review in Monde Musical, March 30, 1898, p. 446. The program included a Beethoven sonata, Chopin's Ballades, Op. 22 and Op. 38, Impromptu Op. 36 and Polonaise Op. 53, and Liszt's two Légendes, Rêves d'amour [Liebesträume] and Mephisto-Walzer.

⁶⁶See Da Clementi a Pollini, pp. 123-24. I myself noticed Cortot's "Beethoven phase" in 1977 while trying to compile a list of his performance repertoire from concert reviews.

⁶⁷See Gut and Pistone, pp. 44-46, 64-76.

⁶⁸See Barthes, "Musica Practica," in Image-Music-Text, tr. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 150-52.

⁶⁹*Ibid*, p. 152.

⁷⁰By the 1890s it was customary for Beethoven sonatas to be studied in the advanced piano classes. It was less common for a relatively unknown young pianist to give Beethoven as large a place on his programs as Chopin or Liszt (Cortot's other two preferences in these years), while eschewing the brilliant genre pieces so popular with the public. Moreover, it was rather courageous of Cortot, given the image French pianists had in Germany, to play Beethoven to Berlin audiences. The initiative was rewarded with enthusiastic reviews. O. Zimmer of the Vossische Zeitung noted that "it is really curious for us German critics to see artists like Cortot and Risler emerging on the other side of the Vosges. They have shown us a less pedantic and less heavy Beethoven than we are accustomed to hearing all too often from our own artists..." (A.C., p. 78).

⁷¹A. de Sivry, "Alfred Cortot," Monde Musical, April 15, 1898, p. 467.

⁷²Personal and pragmatic considerations may have dictated Cortot's move away from Beethoven's solo piano literature. Venturing into the sonatas would have placed him in competition with Risler, whom many considered unsurpassable after his performance of the whole cycle of 32 sonatas in 1905. Later, the territory was staked out by a number of great pianists: Artur Schnabel, Edwin Fischer, Wilhelm Backhaus, Yves Nat, Rudolf Serkin, etc.

⁷³The five Beethoven concerti were performed in March of 1909 with the Orchestra Hasselmans of Paris.

⁷⁴One reason for this was that during these early years Cortot played more often abroad with the big symphonic societies than in solo recital. In England he played the Concerti No. 1, 3 and 5 (earliest performance in Britain located thus far: 1914, 1924 and 1919, respectively). In the U.S. he performed all five in two programs at Carnegie Hall in 1920. Cortot did not program the solo sonatas often after 1930, but his interest in them never waned. According to Gyorgy Sebok (conversation with the author, Sept. 1977), Cortot attempted to record all 32 sonatas with supplementary interpretive commentary in the late 1950's, but few of these efforts were technically satisfactory. Reportedly there exist on tape two unissued versions of each sonata, plus excerpts for demonstrative purposes (see Charles Timbrell, "A Cortot Discography," Piano Quarterly, No. 127 [Fall 1984] p. 29).

⁷⁵Cours d'interprétation, pp. 92-134, 179-192. For the sonatas not included in this volume see Monde Musical, 43, No. 9 (Sept. 30, 1932), pp. 265-69; No. 10 (Oct. 31, 1932), pp. 309-312; No. 11 (Nov. 30, 1932), pp. 339-41; and No. 12 Dec. 31, 1932), pp. 379-82.

⁷⁶Cf. Cours d'interprétation, p. 98: "All Beethoven's work was influenced by the ideas of independence, audacity, liberty... which were seething in people's minds [at that time]....[He] is inconceivable without the [French] Revolution"; p. 108: "We know that Beethoven wrote only to deliver himself of some torment"; p. 124: "[His] sentiment, far from being purely subjective, tends through an increasingly universalized art to express the collective human spirit. [He] brings together all our sufferings, miseries, aspirations [and] communicates with them." See also p. 97 on dramatic development; pp. 102, 122 on the shattering of formal stereotypes.

⁷⁷"Beethoven... affirmed that all feelings, even anger, can be inspiring. This [exposition of the fugue of Op. 106]

conveys a terrible turn of his mind. He does not want to be pleasant,... to flatter the ear. He grabs us by the scruff of the neck and shakes us furiously" (ibid., p. 121).

78"...[T]he second theme was not initially exploited as an element of contrast by composers of sonatas,... and if Mozart envisioned a dramatic role for it, he did so only in the presentation of the two subjects, and not in their development. It was Beethoven who went beyond the limits of formalism... in depicting... the pathos of human feelings through the conflict he set up between the two ideas" (ibid., p. 98).

79Ibid., p. 130.

80For instance, Cortot found that the Sonata Op. 13 ("Pathétique") "begins with a dire theme. It is Fate, if you wish, i.e., everything that is most alien to our will." After this, at m. 5 of the Introduction, Beethoven presents "two contrasting elements, one imploring, the other menacing.... The character of the Allegro is rebellious and anguished (douleureux). One must imbue it with passion, grief, in a general mood of fiery animation," etc. (ibid., p. 99). The opening of Op. 111 reminds him of Beethoven's remark: "I want to seize Destiny by the throat." The initial fortissimo octaves "express this call of Destiny" and the whole page, with its arpeggios that should be "hurled upwards like a thunder clap," is "the music of a hero who battles, fists and teeth clenched, against Fatality" (ibid., p. 130).

81cf. Cours d'interprétation, pp. 115, 117, 121, 128.

82Da Clementi a Pollini, p. 126. Cortot's five lecture recitals at the Université des Annales in 1936 on Beethoven, summarized in Conferencia No. 10, pp. 569-575; No. 12, pp. 677-685; No. 14, pp. 97-108; No. 16, pp. 219-226 and No. 18, pp. 334-341 (1936) further confirm Rattalino's hypothesis about Cortot's romantic image of Beethoven.

83Both performances, recorded from a Duo-Art piano, have been reissued on Klavier 110.

84Wagner was less of a problem for pianists only because they did not have to perform the literature. To composers, his musical achievement was often overwhelming and oppressive. Cf. Chabrier's reaction, as quoted by Zimmermann, p. 120: "And now Wagner is dead! - but he has written Tristan!"

85Da Clementi a Pollini, p. 232.

86One notable exception can be mentioned: 1932, the Beethoven centenary year, may have been the first time Cortot,

Casals and Thibaud performed the Beethoven Trios Op. 1, No. 1 and 2, Op. post. 38 and Op. post. 154 (Allegretto only).

⁸⁷Though Cortot did not officially resign from this post until 1910, his active participation in rehearsals and concerts dwindled from 1908-09 on, due to an accelerating number of other concert engagements.

⁸⁸Jean Loubier, liner notes to a 4-record set of trios by Beethoven, Haydn, Mendelssohn, Schubert and Schumann, reissued on the EMI Références series (1984, EMI France 2900583), p. 4.

⁸⁹Cortot knew Thibaud from his Conservatoire days, when the two often met to read through the sonata literature at home for fun (A.C., p. 45). His last appearances with Thibaud were November 26 and 30 and December 3, 1943 in Paris, where the two presented the complete Beethoven Sonatas for violin/piano.

⁹⁰Cortot/Entretiens, "La Carrière publique."

⁹¹Entretiens, "Musiciens que j'ai connu."

⁹²Entretiens, "La Carrière publique."